



a **faith** worth
thinking about

introducing the **unitarians**

who are the **unitarians**?



The flaming chalice has become a symbol of Unitarians worldwide. Many of our congregations begin their worship by lighting the chalice.

The Unitarians are a **spiritual community** who encourage you to **think for yourself**.

THEY 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 setting for this is a **community** that welcomes you for what you are – beliefs, doubts, questions and all!

THEY CAN BE CALLED 'RELIGIOUS LIBERALS'

- **religious** because they unite to **celebrate** and **affirm** values that embrace and reflect a **greater reality than the self**
- **liberal** because they claim **no exclusive revelation or status** for themselves; because they afford **respect** and **toleration** to those who follow **different paths** of faith.

THEY ARE CALLED 'UNITARIANS'

- because of their traditional insistence on **divine unity**, the oneness of God
- because they affirm the **essential unity** of humankind and of creation.

a **distinctive** approach to religion

UNITARIANS AFFIRM THAT

- people should enjoy **individual liberty** and **private judgment** in spiritual matters
- **respect for integrity** is preferable to the **pressure to conform**
- we are all engaged on a **life-quest**, the development of the **personal value system** by which each of us lives
- our **beliefs may change** in the light of new understanding and insight
- the final authority for your faith lies within **your own conscience**.

ON THIS JOURNEY WE ARE AIDED AND INSPIRED BY

- the **example** and **spiritual insights** of others
- **writings** deemed 'holy' and 'sacred' by the various faith-traditions of humanity
- inherited traditions of **critical** and **philosophical thought**
- the ongoing **creative work** of artists, musicians and writers
- the **scientist's search** for knowledge and understanding.



Children's story being told during the anniversary service at the General Assembly Annual Meetings

a **bond** of unity



Fulwood Old Chapel in Sheffield, which dates from 1728.

Unitarians find their **bond of unity** in **shared values**, such as

- the **nurture** of life's **spiritual** dimension
- the use of **reason** and **honest doubt** in the search for truth
- mutual **respect** and **goodwill** in personal relations
- constructive **tolerance** and **openness** towards the sincerely-held beliefs of others
- **peace, compassion, justice** and **democracy** in human affairs
- **reverence** for the earth and the whole natural system of which we are part.

It is the Unitarian experience that values such as these form a more effective foundation for true community than insistence on uniformity of belief and doctrine.

Unitarians affirm that truth and humanity are best served where **both the mind and the conscience are free**. They maintain that no one book, institution or individual has the monopoly on truth, no matter what they may claim for themselves or their devotees may claim for them.

unitarian **communities**

The purpose of a Unitarian congregation is

- to meet the **spiritual needs** of the individual in the context of a **loving community**
- to share **joy** and to offer **comfort** in times of trial
- to enjoy warmth of **fellowship**
- to make itself **welcoming, inclusive** and a **blessing to the wider world**

Unitarians and Free Christian congregations are scattered unevenly across the British Isles. They may be called **churches, meetings, chapels** or **fellowships**. They may have a minister – who may be a woman or a man – or be led by a lay person. They vary considerably in size – from over a hundred to fewer than ten – and in the scope of their activities. They may meet in their own buildings – anything from a 17th century meeting house to a modern church – in hired premises or in private homes.

Congregations number nearly two hundred in mainland Britain, of which four are in **Scotland** (in the principal cities) and over twenty in **Wales** (many of them Welsh-speaking or bilingual). These communities are **independent** and **democratic** in organisation.

Regionally, they are grouped in **District Associations**. The National Unitarian Fellowship (NUF) helps isolated Unitarians to keep in touch.

In **Ireland**, mainly in the north, there is an independent sister movement, the **Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland**, with a strong liberal Christian identity.

Unitarian and Free Christian communities are linked through the **General Assembly**. This body works to **strengthen the life and witness** of its member congregations and to represent Unitarianism to the wider world.

worship at the heart

At the heart of Unitarianism is **worship**, which usually takes place Sunday by Sunday. Unitarian worship reflects what a **particular community** regards as being of **supreme worth**.

A Unitarian service may comprise

- worship of the divine
- celebration of life
- affirmation of shared values
- recognition of our failings
- commitment to the meeting of human need
- encouragement of human potential

Many elements may be used to contribute to the worship experience.



The order in which these appear may vary, and not all of them will necessarily be present. Those who lead worship seek to make it inclusive and meaningful for people with differing beliefs and needs.

the **unitarian** worship-cycle

The Unitarian **worship-cycle** usually marks

- the **feasts and fasts** of the **Christian** year
- the changing **seasons and cycles** of the **earth**
- **occasions and festivals** from the **wider human heritage**, both religious and secular – such as Human Rights Day and World AIDS Day
- **lives and events** which have a special place in **human history** and **spiritual development**

Unitarians offer **special services** to celebrate **birth and naming, marriage or partnership**, or a life that has ended. These are arranged, as far as possible, to **express the beliefs** and to **meet the needs** of those most closely involved.

Communion, where practised, expresses in simple sharing and fellowship our **thanks** for Jesus and all 'great souls', **solidarity** with the cause of human welfare, and **recognition** of our dependence on the **earth's divine bounty**.



The naming of children, weddings, same-sex blessings, funerals and other significant life events are occasions unique to the participants.



religious **education**

Unitarians – children and adults – often participate in religious education programmes which are **distinctive, thought-provoking** and **enjoyable**.

Religious education for **children** is designed to

- encourage **spiritual awakening** and **development**
- build on a child's **natural sense of wonder**
- channel positively the impulse to **enquire** and **create**
- share **stories** from our **religious inheritance** and from **other faiths**.

Religious education for **adults** is vital too. Its purpose is to

- help you **understand** and **evaluate** your own **inherited beliefs and values**, and those of others
- provide a forum for the free and respectful **interchange** of **ideas** and **insights**
- help you 'build **your own theology**' out of the bricks of **heritage, experience, intuition** and **reflection**
- explore ways in which spiritual values can be applied to life in the world

Many Unitarian congregations offer religious education programmes, for both young and old.

Other educational events are organised at a national or district level; for example children and young people come together from all over the country to participate in the **National Youth Programme**.

Religious growth and learning are the life-blood of the Unitarian movement.

unitarians and **society**

Unitarians have traditionally taken a positive view of human nature. They believe **people are worth caring about**.

In the spirit of civil and religious liberty, they support **equality of respect** and **opportunity for everyone**. They **oppose oppression and discrimination** on the grounds of any arbitrary or accidental factor, such as race or gender, sexual orientation or religious belief.

Unitarians balance a concern for general wellbeing with respect for the rights of the individual. They believe there must be a **compromise** between **personal freedom** and **social responsibility**.

The vision of the kingdom of God, a global commonwealth of **peace, justice** and **plenty for all**, has always been important for Unitarians. It has inspired their **social** and **political** involvement, duly tempered by a **realistic assessment** of what can be **achieved**.



Inner city children enjoy holidays based at The Nightingale Centre at Great Hucklow in Derbyshire. These holidays are made possible by the Send a Child to Hucklow Fund.

unitarians and **christianity**

The Unitarian movement arose and evolved in the **Christian tradition**. Today most Unitarians are happy to acknowledge this living relationship in some way. Many are glad to call themselves **Free** or **liberal Christians**. It is recognised, though, that there are many people who find **difficulty in coming to terms** with **Judaeo-Christianity**.

Unitarians are concerned to provide fellowship and worship which, while respecting the liberal Christian tradition, will have meaning for these people too. Among Unitarians there are those who find the focus of their faith elsewhere than in Christianity, for example in **religious humanism** or **earth-centred Spirituality**.


What, then, do Unitarians think about God, about Jesus and about the Bible?

Unitarians recognise that the word 'God' has no single definition, that it may be used to describe

- what a person or faith-community feels to be the ultimate in their own belief system
- what is of supreme worth and significance in their own lives.

Unitarians **do not claim the right** to define God for others. These are some of the ways in which they describe and experience God

- as a **universal father** or **mother**
- as a unifying and **life-giving spirit** – reflective of both **masculine** and **feminine**
- as the **source of all being**, within which the creative process is unfolding
- as a primarily inward reality – the **“still, small voice”**
- as a **symbol** for the noblest visions and aspirations of humankind – the standard against which to measure ourselves
- as a **‘great mystery’** about which little can be said.



Some Unitarians find the word 'God' meaningless, or believe it is too debased by misuse to have any value.

Unitarians hold **Jesus** in high regard. Generally speaking, they think of him

- as a **teacher** in the **rabbinic** and **prophetic tradition** of Judaism, whose central message was the call to love
- as a **powerful example** of **integrity, courage** and **compassionate living**
- as fully and unequivocally **human**
- as divine only in the sense that his life and work revealed – or came to symbolise – the **divinity** and **high potential** inherent **in everyone**.

Unitarians see Jesus as a major figure – for some the central figure – in humanity's **spiritual journey**. Most would therefore **honour** – **but not worship** – him accordingly.

The Bible is valued by most Unitarians as

- the **human record** of a people's long struggle to understand their origins, their destiny and their God
- a **deep fund of wisdom** and **insight** deserving both attention and **respect**.

Unitarians do not regard it as an inerrant, unquestionable authority. They believe it should be read in the **light of reason**, informed by the insights of **biblical criticism** and **scholarship**.

When they accept something in the Bible as true, they do so because it **rings true** in their own **humble reflection** upon it – not simply because it is in the Bible.

unitarians and **other faiths**

Unitarians recognise that there will always be **different ways** of **understanding** and **interpreting** the human condition. They regard the existence of many **diverse expressions** of faith as inevitable, and also potentially **enriching**. They believe that learning to live with religious diversity is a **major challenge** for our times. As a result, Unitarians

- **engage in dialogue** with people of other faiths
- promote opportunities for different religions to **share their spiritual treasures** in worship and celebration
- are **active** locally and nationally in **inter-faith** and ecumenical (inter-church) organisations.

Internationally, Unitarians are founder-members of the **International Association for Religious Freedom** (founded in 1900). This has member groups from all the world's major faith traditions – and a few more besides! Its activities include inter-faith dialogue and social action in many countries.



Tibetan Tashi Lhunpo monks with the sand mandala they created in the Brighton Unitarian Church as part of the Brighton World Sacred Music Festival.

the **historical** and **global** context

The roots of the Unitarian movement lie principally in the **Reformation** of the 16th century. At that time people in many countries across Europe began to claim

- **the right** to read and interpret the Bible for themselves
- **the right** to have a direct relationship with God, without the mediation of priest or church
- **the right** to set their own conscience against the claims of religious institutions.

Many came to question *orthodox* Christian doctrine and to affirm beliefs of their own. These included

- the **unity or unipersonality** of God, as opposed to the doctrine of the Trinity – hence the name ‘Unitarian’
- the **humanity**, as opposed to the deity, of Christ
- the **worth of human beings**, as opposed to ideas of original sin, inherited guilt and innate depravity
- the **universal salvation** of all souls, as opposed to the doctrine that most of humanity is predestined to damnation.

The earliest organised Unitarian movements were founded in the 16th century in **Poland** and in **Transylvania** (part of present-day Romania).

In Britain, a number of early radical reformers professed Unitarian beliefs in the 16th and 17th centuries, some suffering **imprisonment** and **martyrdom**.

An organised Unitarian movement emerged only in the late 18th century. The first avowedly Unitarian church in Britain was opened in **Essex Street, London**, in 1774 (on the site where Unitarian headquarters stands today).

Denominational structures were developed during the 19th century, finally uniting in the present **General Assembly** in 1928.

Today Unitarian movements exist in a number of countries around the world. Most originated independently by process of spiritual evolution similar to that which occurred in Britain. Many are now linked through the **International Council of Unitarians and Universalists** (ICUU), founded in 1995.



The Rev. Dr Joseph Priestley (1733-1804), Unitarian minister, scientist and political radical. Photo courtesy of the Trustees of Dr Williams's Library.

If you have found this pamphlet interesting and would like to find out about a congregation near you or receive other information please contact the Unitarian Information Department. Other leaflets available include:

WHERE TO FIND US

Unitarian and Free Christian congregations in the British Isles – their addresses and times of services.

YOUR FIRST TIME AT A UNITARIAN SERVICE?

Explains what you can expect to find when visiting a Unitarian service of worship.

UNITARIAN VIEWS OF JESUS

Contemporary Unitarians give a variety of views on the life and teachings of Jesus and their significance today.

UNITARIANISM ... THE CONTINUING STORY

A brief history of the Unitarian movement in Britain and the USA over the last three centuries.

UNITARIANS CELEBRATE BIRTH

Describes the personalised approach to the celebration of a birth that Unitarians offer. Companion leaflets describe Unitarian Wedding Ceremonies and Funeral and Memorial Services.

UNITARIAN VIEWS OF EARTH AND NATURE

Six Unitarian women and men reflect here on the relationship between humans and the natural world.

UNITARIANS AND WORLD RELIGIONS

Traces Unitarian involvement in the study of world religions over two centuries.

Also available is the booklet **Unitarian? What's That? Questions and answers about a liberal religious alternative** by Rev Cliff Reed, price £2.50 including postage. Lists of other books can also be provided.



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