

BEING CONNECTED

A worship service to celebrate and reflect on the importance
of individual congregations being connected through the
General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches.

For use on **GA Sunday** and other occasions celebrating our connectedness



The hunger to belong is not merely a desire to be attached to something. It is rather sensing that great transformation and discovery become possible when belonging is sheltered and true.

John O'Donohue
[Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom]

The Unitarian Movement is sometimes described as a patchwork quilt. Hopefully it is as beautiful as this example made by Margaret Hill of the York Unitarian congregation



This Worship Service has been prepared by the Worship Panel for
The General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches
Essex Hall, 1-6 Essex Street, Strand, London WC2R 3HY

Introductory Note: *The worship resources that follows should provide enough material for a complete service. The order of service is only one possibility – you may wish to change the order or the hymns, or perhaps add some other worship elements, for example ‘Candles of Joy and Concern’, a special musical contribution, a substantial period of silence for private reflection. Please treat this as a starting point for developing your ‘Being Connected’ service. The service is designed for use at **GA Weekend** or other occasions when you wish to celebrate our connectedness.*

Call to Worship

We come from separate places to be together here.
We know only a little of each other’s thoughts,
dreams and cherished hopes,
only a very little of each other’s confusion and anxiety.
But together, here, we become as one,
lifted by each human presence,
lifted by the spirit flowing between us,
the comfort of togetherness.
Every whisper of truth, every openness of heart
takes away our separateness
and binds us to the common purpose
of serving what is good, beautiful and true.

Margaret Kirk

Chalice Lighting

Each of the stars in the heavens is unique, an individual,
yet together they form the night sky.
Each of us here is unique, an individual,
yet together we are a congregation.
Each of our congregations is unique, an individual,
yet together we are an Assembly.

For the stars in the sky, for people in pews, for members
of our Assembly, in gratitude, we light this chalice.

Erik Walker Wikstrom
(Permission to use requested)

Hymn *Sing Your Faith* No 62 Here we have gathered
Hymns of Faith and Freedom No 432 God of the morning
Hymns for Living No 176 O come together in truth

Prayer

Divine Unity, fount of life and love,
we pray today for our General Assembly.

We pray for the congregations who form its membership
and for all who maintain their worship and witness.

We pray for the willing volunteers who serve at local and district,
national and international level.

We pray for the Assembly’s dedicated staff,
conscious of the burdens we lay upon them, and the thanks we fail to give.

We pray for those who devote their lives to ministry,
giving thanks for their vocation and service.

We pray too for those lay-folk who serve as pastors and leaders in our churches, meetings and fellowships.

In times of uncertainty and change, we pray for faith and wisdom to be strengthened, and restored where they have been lost.

Grant us the power of love to heal all division and may faithfulness to you be the bedrock on which we build.

This we ask in the spirit of Jesus our brother and all your messengers. Amen.

Cliff Reed

Children's Story – United we stand!

Peeping out from her little hole in the skirting board one day, a mouse noticed the farmer and his wife opening a package. 'Maybe there's some food in there,' thought the mouse. 'I'll probably be able to have a feast when they go to bed!' Unfortunately, however, it wasn't food. It was a mousetrap! 'Oh, my goodness!' thought the mouse. 'They are trying to get rid of me! I'd better get some help!' With that, she scurried into the farmyard. Approaching the hen, she called out, 'The farmer and his wife have bought a mousetrap! They are trying to kill me! Help me please!' The hen carried on pecking at the grubs in the ground. 'Don't ask me for help,' she said. 'I'm too busy laying eggs. You'll have to deal with the problem yourself.'

The mouse hurried to the pig sty. 'Help me, please, Mr. Pig,' she squeaked. 'The farmer and his wife have bought a mousetrap and are trying to kill me!' 'I'm sorry to hear that,' said the pig. 'I wish you well, and I'll remember you in my prayers, but I'm afraid I can't offer any practical assistance.'

Finally, the mouse ran into the field where a cow was grazing. 'Mrs Cow! Mrs Cow!' she called out, 'please help me! The farmer and his wife have a new mousetrap and they are after my blood!' 'What's that to do with me?' asked the cow. 'They're not after my blood. I'm too valuable to them. I give them milk every day. Just be careful where you put your feet.'

The frightened mouse returned to her hole in the skirting board. That night, just as she was dropping off to sleep, she heard a terrible scream. Peering out from her hole, she could just make out the farmer's wife holding up the mousetrap. A big, venomous snake had been caught by its tail, but before the woman could remove it and throw it outside, the snake bit her savagely on the hand. The poor woman fell to the floor. Awakened by the scream and the commotion, the farmer rushed downstairs, bashed the snake on the head, and picked up his unconscious wife.

The snake bite gave the woman a terrible fever and she was confined to bed. Now, everyone knows that the best way of treating a fever is chicken soup. So the farmer went into the farmyard and killed the chicken, which he made into a nourishing broth for his wife.

But she didn't get better. She was so ill that all her friends and neighbours came round to sit with her and to help look after her. Now, everyone knows that when people come to stay they have to be fed, but there was so little food in the house that the farmer had to go to the pigsty to kill the pig, just so that he could feed them all! Sadly, the poor woman died. Now, everyone knows that mourners at a funeral need food, so the farmer had no option but to go into the field and kill the cow.

The chicken, the pig and the cow all thought that the mousetrap was the mouse's problem; but they all died because of it!

A story by Bill Darlison from Concentration and Compassion

Hymn Sing Your Faith No. 178 Together now we join as one
Hymns of Faith and Freedom No. 190 He whom the master loved
Hymns for Living No. 188 Let love continue long

The President's Message

Each year the President of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches issues a 'message' to members. This is distributed to Congregations and is available on the GA web site.

Meditation

Being Connected - a guided meditation

The words in italics are guide-notes; words in ordinary type are for the meditation leader to say. Words in [square brackets] indicate a choice to be made depending on the particular circumstances, e.g. where the text says [England/Scotland/Wales] the choice implied is the country that the meditation is being conducted in.

We will now do a 'guided meditation' on the theme of 'Being Connected' – connected in general, as people; and connected in this General Assembly to other Unitarians.

A candle is lit where all present can see it.

When you are ready, you are invited to sit up in your seat with a straight spine and with your feet flat on the floor. You may find it helpful to place your hands face up over your upper thighs, with your fingers not quite touching. Allow yourself to be as comfortable and steady as you can.

The leader says each passage of the meditation slowly. Pause for a few seconds where there is an ellipsis (...)

Focus your awareness on the candle, allowing yourself to receive light...

Beginning with your feet and moving up the body, while breathing in, tense all parts of your body, hold the tension a moment, then release it with a vigorous exhalation.

Repeat this.

When you are ready, close your eyes. If it feels good, it is fine to open your eyes at any time during the meditation, focus on the candle for a short time, and close them again.

Feel yourself in Light. You may sense that Light as white, or golden, or the colour of love or peace. Let Light flow through you everywhere... Let your whole being be suffused with the Light. The Light fills you from within and from without... Feel yourself surrounded by Light above you, below you, to the left, to the right, behind you, in front of you, beyond you, within you....Receive the presence of that Light at the point between your eyebrows...

Feel that Light expand outwards from the point between your eyebrows in all directions... Let it surround and suffuse the person sitting nearest to you... the people close to you... each person who is with you in this place.

Now visualise this great Light becoming bigger, stronger, growing and flowing through every part of this building... visualise Light permeating everyone who comes into this place today...this month... this year... in time to come.....

Feel that Light growing and flowing into the people you love... all whom you care for or care about... the people whom you meet daily, or frequently... people with whom you have strains and stresses... visualise each person filled with and surrounded by Light...

Now visualise your Light growing still larger and flowing into every Unitarian meeting and Fellowship in the country... see the great Light filling every person in each congregation and gathering...expand that Light until it includes every congregation in the District...every church, chapel, meeting, fellowship affiliated to the Unitarian General Assembly... imagine your Light filling and sustaining all the Ministers who serve all the Unitarian congregations... all the Lay Leaders... all the staff at Essex Hall... all the office-bearers... all the keepers of the keys, the minders of the children, the tenders of the gardens, the people who repair the roofs, attend to the lights, greet at the doors, make the coffees... all who take care in every way... see in your Light each person who connects less, or more, to the Unitarians throughout the United Kingdom.....

Now expand that Light to include all Unitarians in Ireland, in Romania, in Hungary, in the United States, in India, in Africa and Australasia, everywhere.....

Now feel that great Light expand still further. Visualise your Light growing and flowing into all people of all faiths throughout the world... into all creatures, the deep salt sea, the entire planet... into all beings in all the worlds...

We shall close this meditation with an affirmation. When you are ready, you may open your eyes... We shall say this affirmation three times.

If the words are printed in the order of service it can be said in unison; if not, the leader can say each line and the congregation can repeat it.

May all the beings in all the worlds be happy.
Samasta lo kaa sukhino bhavantu*
May all the beings in all the worlds be happy.

* Sanskrit that translates 'may all the beings in all the worlds be happy'. The stress is samasta lo kaa sukhino bhavantu. 'sukh' rhymes with 'cook'.

Wade Miller-Knight

Music

A short piece of quiet music – either live or recorded

Hymn Sing Your Faith No. 28 Dear weaver of our lives' design
Hymns of Faith and Freedom No.417 The founders built this city
Hymns for Living No. 182 All are our neighbours

A brief history lesson and a reflection on the current General Assembly

Brief History

When the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches was created in 1928 not everyone thought it would succeed. The Inquirer included several letters in the period before its setting up prophesying doom, and that it would soon fall apart in acrimony. The first joint GA President (they had two in the first year) Rev Henry

Gow in his address at the opening meetings in Manchester in April 1929 said, 'It was a daring experiment, one which many might think would surely lead to disaster, the loss of all unity and coherence. Churches which had no creedal bar to membership, a ministry which had no creedal test for fitness – how could these form a foundation upon which a religious community could be built?'

There had been the Unitarian wing of this liberal religious movement who were assertive in claiming the distinctiveness of their standpoint, and then there were the free Christians who saw their faith tradition as a catholic one in the best sense of the word with an aim to encompass as many like-minded believers as possible. In the late 19th century these two wings sometimes hardly spoke to each other without arguing, yet now they were expected come together under the same umbrella. The name itself, despite continuing doubts as to its wider meaning, represents a hard won compromise.

Even with these uncertainties the GA worked well from the start, and few churches or ministers decided to remain outside. It was from the first seen as a necessary development, so much so that Henry Gow added, 'We have banded ourselves together in this Free Fellowship to encourage and strengthen each other for our work, not with denominational conceit or exclusivity, but with a deep feeling of the sacred trust committed to our charge.'

The GA has always been a patchwork of people, churches and beliefs. Its success, and by its very continuance that is what it is, is based on a sense of compromise and communication amongst the congregations and the people who make it up. In over eighty years there has never been a danger of it splitting apart despite the disparate views held within its constituent parts. Ways of speaking together and seeing the other point of view have consistently been found despite people and organisations seemingly being poles apart. This is a cause for continuing celebration. We continue to worship together under one banner, and this service is an attempt to celebrate this achievement.

Alan Ruston

A reflection on the current role of the General Assembly

The Patchwork

Sometimes people ask me to comment on how I see the Unitarian and Free Christian community as a whole. I have often used the term 'patchy'. Indeed I have used the analogy of a patchwork quilt to describe what I have seen, thus:

Some of the patches are bold and colourful, standing out from the rest, whereas others have quieter, calmer patterns and shades. All are necessary for the patchwork cover to be effective. From time to time, some of the patches become worn out or even torn and damaged and remedial work needs to be done to restore or change them. This is happening all the time in the Assembly. A few churches are closing, a few others are going through turmoil and others still, are growing or grouping together to work for and support each other. From time to time the whole coverlet is found to need an overhaul.

Belonging

You all belong here in some way or other. Some of you may have belonged to other Unitarian churches or chapels and now worship here. Some of you may be life-long members from childhood. Some may have moved away and come back. And some of you may have attended another denomination but now feel that you belong here.

But what does belonging mean in our Unitarian community?

It's much easier to belong to a small group of people who meet regularly – our chapel, our theatre group, our art class and so on, than to a larger group, especially if that group is nation-wide. In belonging, we both give and take from the various groups that we are members of and we hold something in common with all the other members. In the case of our chapel communities what we hold in common, and what we try to pass on to our children or to newcomers, are the values and principles of Unitarianism, our history, our love of the place and its buildings, and of course, the care for and friendship of those who worship beside us. As the Rev Linda Hart of our Richmond church said, in *The Inquirer*, *'we take part in an institution. This church is not only a religious community. It is an institution which provides a place for some of what we find important in our lives to be guarded and nurtured and carried forward into the future.'* It's comparatively easy to be recognised by and make a commitment to our local Unitarian community but that is not the same as having the impetus to make a commitment to the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. As one of the members of my congregation at Dukinfield, who sadly is no longer with us, used to say, *'We have members of Old Chapel and we have Unitarians and they aren't necessarily the same thing.'*

I was rather shocked to find, that despite the fact that several members of our congregation work for the national movement, in all sorts of ways, things have not improved greatly, even now. Many members still tend to see the GA as something nebulous and remote. Something that goes on in London, at Essex Hall, in a 'different world'. *'What does it mean?' they say. 'What does it do? Why do we have to pay the quota? What quota? I didn't know that some of the money I give to chapel goes to the GA? What has it ever done for us?'* These are elements of a recent dialogue. So, I made a list to give out with the Community Appeal envelopes, and to inform members generally of some of the things the GA provides. Here's the list.

- funding the training of ministers
- training lay worship leaders and preachers
- providing a service to calculate ministers' stipends and making grants to help pay them
- organising a national Unitarian website and keeping it up to date
- helping all congregations and districts to have colourful and attractive websites
- employing, albeit part-time, a Youth Officer and a Director of Ministry and full time, a Chief Executive and other staff at Essex Hall
- subsidising youth weekends, enabling young Unitarians from across the country to meet together, usually at The Nightingale Centre.
- acting as Trustees of the Nightingale Centre
- providing Unitarian representatives on national, governmental, church and social responsibility bodies – so that our distinctive voice is heard
- supporting congregations through congregational change, such as when a minister leaves
- assisting congregations and ministers throughout their partnership
- training for people leading religious education for all ages
- responding helpfully to general inquiries from congregations
- running a Unitarian book service and publishing new books
- organising the GA annual meetings
- providing information in the form of leaflets and posters for congregations to display and distribute
- ensuring that congregational officers and trustees have up to date information on their responsibilities in running a charity
- Providing worship material, including hymn books

- Responding to inquiries from the general public

And I'm sure that isn't definitive. *(please feel free to make your own list, and add detail that you are aware of)*

But belonging to the larger Unitarian community is more than that. The GA is the national face of the religion we have chosen to live by. Some of us attend our local congregations to express our commitment; some of us belong to Unitarian societies to show our commitment. Together, we are the living example of a truly liberal religion, rooted in Christianity and built on the three elements of Freedom, Reason and Tolerance. To quote Linda Hart, again, *'Our religion is too big to be contained in a single scripture and we find that wisdom grows from many sources.'* We positively encourage our members to find their own spiritual pathway in loving companionship with like-minded others. Because generally our groups are small and disparate we need, all the more, a national identity. We need to know about and be in touch with other groups. Which, of course, is just how most of our district associations began and indeed, how, in 1928 the two larger separate Unitarian groups – the National Conference and the British and Foreign Unitarian Association put aside their differences and formed the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. All congregations, at that time, with the exception of Old Meeting, Birmingham, whose minister was a leading member of the Free Catholic Movement, joined the new association. I think we would miss it more than we think if the GA no longer existed.

Once we make a commitment to the liberal faith, it is a commitment to stay, to truly belong, a moral commitment to diversity and a religious commitment to live within the tension inherent in a liberal faith. As the hymn 'Let Love Continue Long' says,

If we in love unite
 Debate can cause no strife
 For with this love in sight
 Disputes enrich our life
 For with this bond of human love
 Disputes can mean a richer life.

If only we could remember this when, inevitably, mistakes are made, people don't live up to our expectations, we say things in an unthinking way which appear deliberately hurtful to others, and so on. We should revel in our differences and diversity within our GA and rejoice in the way in which, at our best, we work successfully with them, rather than focussing on how and where they don't work so well.

Belonging means giving and taking. Giving of our time, our talents and skills and our money. Both our small communities, our chapels and churches and the wider Unitarian community need all those things from us. Our time, our talents and skills and our money. We give for all kinds of reasons but above all we give because we belong and think it is important, in the words of the GA object:
 'To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the Liberal Christian tradition.'

Long may people continue to belong to our Unitarian communities both large and small.

Dawn Buckle

Hymn Sing Your Faith No. 208 When our heart is in a holy place
 Hymns of Faith and Freedom No.216 What purpose burns within our hearts
 Hymns for Living No. 192 We would be one as now we join in singing

Closing Blessing

Beloved Community-
-suffused with the Divine Presence-
we will carry you in our hearts always.

May our inner life be nourished by our community.
And may our community be strengthened
by each person's unique gifts.

May we honour the diversity of our spiritual journeys,
and help each other on the path. Amen.

Yvonne Aburrow

Appendix.

This piece by Rev. Andrew Hill might be used instead of or additional to what is already in the worship service,

LIFE IS LIKE A BOX OF CHOCOLATES

It is, it is not, it is like...

There are different ways to define something. Three come to mind:

- First of all, we can define something on its own terms. 'It's itself. I'm myself.' But who else understands?
- Secondly, we can define something as 'not this, not that'. But when does one ever get there? [and]
- Thirdly, we can define something metaphorically, according to what else it's like.

For example - Mrs. Gump told Forest "Life is [like] a box of chocolates. You don't know what you'll get next."

UNITARIAN COMMUNITY

Over time I've acquired a whole collection of definitions of Unitarian communities - seventy-two at the last count -

- some define a community as itself - A Unitarian community is a Unitarian community;
- some define a Unitarian community as what it's not 'It's not - historically - a Trinitarian one'.

But the ones which I really like are the Mrs. Gump sort - definitions by metaphor because metaphors integrate, metaphors are inter-dependent and metaphors are holistic. I'd like to share with you some of the things which I think a Unitarian community is like. :

- a garden. • a quilt, • a rainbow, • a stew pot
- a gluepot • a rock • a box of liquorice all sorts

in all, a veritable seven branched candlestick.

...LIKE A GARDEN

1. So first, a Unitarian community is like a garden designed and tended together. People's spiritual needs differ so they need different treatments. Some people need adequate shade, and plant trees and shrubs. Other people need colour and a succession of bright flowers. Others need scent and sweet-smelling herbs and plants. Yet others need useful things and cultivate vegetables. And all the time the garden changes and the plants grow. One plant can choke another. Weeds must be eradicated, seeds sown and new plants introduced. And all the time the proper balance of the garden must be preserved for the well-being of the whole garden community. Unitarian community is like that.

...LIKE A QUILT

2. Secondly, a Unitarian community is like a quilt, a patchwork of people of different shapes, sizes and prejudices, different colours, enthusiasms, ages, and moods; a patchwork quilt to creep under from the colds of solitariness, fear and partialness, somewhere to experience the warmth of companionship, wholeness and love. To leave Unitarian community is to leave the quilt's warm cosiness for the openness, opportunity and challenge of the wider world. Unitarian community is like that.

...LIKE A RAINBOW

3. Thirdly, a Unitarian Community is like a rainbow - a multi-colour of faith and people, violet humanists, indigo theists, blue inter-faith types, green pagans, yellow atheists, orange agnostics and red Christians - a spectrum where, at the edges, the differences always fade gently and generously into one another, and one cannot really tell where one person's faith position ends and another's starts, and where the differences of faith and culture and colour all emerged from one, and mercifully re-merge to one. Unitarian community is like that.

...LIKE A STEW POT

4. Fourthly, a Unitarian community is like a stew pot, but instead of the missionary in the pot alone, everyone is in there together; and so slow and so gentle is the cooking, that over time individual flavours cannot fail to influence each other in subtle and caring ways. The quality of the stew depends upon the quality of the cooking. Unitarian community is like that.

...LIKE A GLUE POT

5. Fifthly, a Unitarian community is like a glue pot - sticky. Audrey the other Sunday asked me "Is John still through there?". The glue pot is a down to earth, non-sophisticated, non-theological, human scale metaphor. But it fits small churches where, just as people start leaving for home, they get caught up with someone else. Couples do a ding-dong sort of thing. A's ready and B isn't so A starts talking to C and then when B's ready C isn't and so on. The best conversations always start on doorsteps. Churches are sticky places; and so long as the glue doesn't set rock hard, the community holds us gently while we move round about and in and out. Unitarian community is like that.

...LIKE A ROCK

6. Sixthly, a Unitarian community is like a rock, like a mountain, which may surprise since rocks are supposedly rock hard, solid. But then rocks aren't always what they seem to be. Einstein said matter is frozen energy. Caught up in the rocks are countless highly active atoms, bustling with protons and neutrons and electrons. Apparently static rocks are really hives of buzzing industry, fields of busy, persistent and consistent activity. Unitarian community is like that.

...LIKE A PACKET OF LIQUORICE ALL SORTS

7. Seventhly, and finally one of my favourite metaphors. Unitarian community is like a packet of liquorice all sorts - all sorts and conditions of people - round, flat, cylindrical, some just liquorice, some covered with little pink and blue dots, some in single, and double and triple sandwiches with white, brown and orange layers, all different, like people at church, but also having something in common, black liquorice. Like the liquorice all sorts, people are diverse in their personal theologies, in their personal seasons, in their personal types - some people are smooth, some complex, and some of us just plain awkward and covered in little knobs. Unitarian community is like that.

IN SUMMARY

So then, in summary form, what is a Unitarian community like?

- like a packet of liquorice sweets, all sorts and conditions;
- like the atoms of a rock, busy and buzzing;
- like the colours of a rainbow, seven theologies diverging and merging to one;
- like a glue pot, full of lovely/sticky people;
- like the flavours of a stew pot, the people mingling together;
- like a quilt, a patchwork of people ;
- like a garden, diverse and self-renewing.

...LIKE A BOX OF CHOCOLATES

But I'd like to add an eighth because - courtesy of Mrs. Gump - that a Unitarian community is also like a box of chocolates. We are such an extraordinary variety of folk - soft centred, nutty, diamond shaped, hard toffee, wrapped in gold foil, all covered in dark chocolate and so irresistible that we really don't know who's coming next, and who the next new member will be.

Unitarian community is like all these eight things, but probably in many ways not like any of them, because metaphors eventually move from something being like something, to something no longer being like something. Quilts, for example, once finished and lacking the capacity for self-renewal become static, age and fade. This is why we should never get obsessed with any one metaphor but move freely from one metaphor to another, always, always adding new likenesses, for it is the likenesses which make us whole and bind us together as one.

THANKS

The Worship Panel are grateful for all the contributions that were offered for inclusion in this worship service. Some resources were specially commissioned.