

Banbury Unitarians News



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

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Letter from the Minister

Dear Friends,

I am writing this less than two weeks before Christmas, and already the frost is lying "deep and crisp and even" on the pavement outside. It looks as though it is going to be a cold Winter!

But no matter what the weather is doing, December is also a time of anticipation and hope, as we look forward to spending the Christmas season with friends and family.

Next year, we will be starting our new Engagement Group course, on Karen Armstrong's book *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. She launched the Charter for Compassion at the end of 2009, since when over 80,000 people have signed up to its values. The message of the Charter for Compassion is one that all human beings should heed. Imagine what the world would be like if everyone followed it! If every person genuinely tried to behave to the rest of humankind with a concern and care for how they would feel. I hope that in the following months, we can learn together how to be more compassionate in our lives and in the wider world.

I cannot quite believe that I have been your minister for a whole year! It has been a time of great happiness for me, as I have got to know you all a bit better, and share your hopes, fears and dreams. Thank you.

Wishing you all a very Merry Christmas, and a Peaceful and Blessed New Year.

In fellowship,

Sue

Calendar for January - March 2013

January

- Wednesday 16th Building Beloved Community (9)
Writing A Covenant Together
- Sunday 27th Worship service, led by Sue Woolley

February

- Wednesday 13th Engagement Group
Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life: Introduction
- Sunday 24th Worship service, led by Sue Woolley

March

- Wednesday 13th Engagement Group
Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life: Step 1
- Sunday 31st Easter Sunday service, led by Sue Woolley

*All worship services are held at
Banbury Town Hall and start at 11.00 am
All Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life sessions are held at
Banbury Town Hall and start at 10.30 am*

Minister's Induction Service

Our Minister's Induction Service will be taking place on **Saturday 2nd March 2013**, at 2.00 pm, at the Town Hall. The Service will be led by Rev. Alex Bradley; Rev. Peter Hewis will be giving the Charge to the Minister, and Rev. Ant Howe will be giving the Charge to the Congregation. Mr. Sandy Ellis will be bringing greetings from the Midland Unitarian Association; Mrs. Alison Thursfield from the National Executive Committee and Rev. Gillian Peel from the Unitarian Ministerial Fellowship. All are invited! **Please put the date in your diaries now!**

Banbury Unitarian Fellowship Comes of Age

In October 1994, the first meeting of the newly-constituted Banbury Unitarian Fellowship was held. We celebrated our coming of age in fine style on 28th October, with a wonderful coffee cake baked by our own Doris Worrall. Sue Woolley's address was a trip down memory lane for many, as she recalled some of the activities that the Fellowship had shared over the years, including Desert Island Discs evenings, Round the World lunches and much else. She concluded by looking to the future:

"let us mark this coming of age as the beginning of a new phase in the life of the Fellowship. If each one of us tried to bring just one visitor along to worship, and if only half of those stayed, wouldn't that be amazing? Not just for us as a Fellowship, but for them as well." Over to you



Building Beloved Community: a personal view

At our Fellowship meeting in February, Sue introduced us to the possibility of an Engagement Group on the topic of Building Beloved Community. This was to be started in mid-March, and to continue for nine months. I must admit that I felt some trepidation and doubt about whether I'd make the nine sessions, but I decided to go with it and see where it took me.

The first session set the pattern for those to come. Sue began with a welcome, followed by a short devotional time, and then an introduction to the topic and activities. Our activities included presenting our own ideas, completing a thought-provoking questionnaire and a mixture of small group and whole group discussions. Lively discussion was an integral part of the course. Then at "check-out", each of us was invited to give a brief comment or opinion on the morning's activities, and we ended the session with short closing devotions.

So each succeeding month, within the above framework, different topics were introduced and I felt a sense of anticipation and began to look forward to being mentally stimulated and challenged. Sometimes I was forced to accept that I was at a loss to know or express what I felt or thought about some of the basic concepts of daily living - how we practice charity, forgiveness, tolerance and compassion to others. Listening to the views and experiences of the group helped and often inspired me to sort things out in my own mind.

In one session which I particularly remember, we were asked to rank different ways of charitable giving, and compare our choices with those of a 12th century Jewish philosopher, Maimonides. It was fascinating to see the similarities and differences over the centuries. On another occasion, Sue asked us to stand in corners, not for bad behaviour, but to show our beliefs regarding the

influence of Fate or the agency of free will, or belief in a deity - challenging questions which most of us don't ponder every day.

Overall, each session stays in my thoughts and, I hope and trust, colours my attitudes and actions, and challenges previously-held opinions. Thankfully I was able to attend most of the sessions, and can honestly say I enjoyed each one, coming away refreshed in mind and spirit - surely a good result. Thank you Sue.

Beryl Thomas



Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life

During 2013, our Engagement Group is going to engage in a very deep way with Karen Armstrong's book *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. After an introductory session in February, we will be looking at one of the Steps described in the book each month, and discussing how we might make that aspect of compassion a part of our lives. Details are given in the Calendar on page 3.



Holy Land Pilgrimage

Fellowship member Helen Gilkes travelled to the Holy Land with the Archdiocese of Birmingham in October. This is her story:

How shall I begin to tell you about this wonderful nine-day pilgrimage? There were about forty pilgrims from Kidlington, Birmingham, Oxford and north of Birmingham. I was the only Banburian, apart from Canon Mervyn Tower of St. John's Church. Father Mervyn was the spiritual leader; very erudite, knowing nine languages, and he gave us much information. He talked about the links between the Old and New Testaments.

The nine days were packed. The hotel accommodation and food were excellent. It is difficult to select 'highlights', as we saw so much. Special moments included walking the Via Dolorosa, visiting Gethsemane and sailing on the Sea of Galilee. It was moving to sing *O Little Town of Bethlehem* in Bethlehem (which is actually quite large!), and to sing *While Shepherds Watched* in the Shepherds' Field.

It was particularly interesting to visit the modern Bethlehem University, founded by the De La Salle Christian Brothers. Seventy per cent of the students are Muslims, and there is a wonderful relationship between students across several different faith traditions.

We had Mass every day and said the *Prayer for Travellers* (see below) several times. I was the only non-Catholic woman on the pilgrimage and felt very privileged. I am not entirely unfamiliar with Catholicism, as I attended two convent schools as a girl.

It was a truly wonderful experience, and I think everyone should visit the Holy Land and its holy sites.

Helen Gilkes

Prayer for Travellers

May the God who called our father Abraham
to journey into the unknown,
and guarded him and blessed him,
protect me too and bless my journey.
May his confidence support me as I set out,
may his Spirit be with me on my way,
and may he lead me back to my home in peace.
Those I love, I commend to his care.
He is with them, I shall not fear.
As for myself, may his presence be my companion,
so that blessings may come to me
and to everyone I meet.
Blessed are you, Lord,
whose presence travels with his people
Amen



Advent by Rosemary Booth

The days start with winter's hush
Slowly the daylight appears.
We welcome the sun when it weakly shines
To banish the shadows and fears.
This time of the year is a time to reflect
On the hopes to accept and the wrongs to reject.
Pregnant days, advent day, expecting a brighter day
When enlightened new birth will illuminate earth.
Hearts will warm, sin will melt in its ray.



Christmas Roses by Rosemary Booth

The leaves fell in autumn;
The trees stand so bare.
With black stencilled branches,
That pattern the air.

The hedgerows are frozen,
A few dead leaves fly,
While icing frost changes
The puddles that lie.

The winter is death.
The snow muffles sound.
The air freezes breath
Rock hard is the ground.

Then in a quiet garden,
A gift in the snow -
I find Christmas roses,
Where no flowers will grow.



The Spirit of Winter Solstice

Winter Solstice is the time of year when the earth turns back towards the light, a time of renewal and hope. But it is also a time to appreciate the necessity of the cyclical nature of things - and to celebrate "the need for withdrawal as an essential part of renewal." There is a beautiful passage in *The Circle of Life: the Heart's Journey through the Seasons* by Joyce Rupp and Macrina Wiederkehr, which really speaks to my condition. My thanks to Frederic Brussat for drawing it to my attention via Twitter:

"There is a tendency to want to hurry from autumn to spring, to avoid the long dark days that winter brings. Many people do not like constant days bereft of light and months filled with colder temperatures. They struggle with the bleakness of land and the emptiness of trees. Their eyes and hearts seek colour. Their spirits tire of tasting the endless gray skies. There is great rejoicing in the thought that light and warmth will soon be filling more and more of each new day.

But winter darkness has a positive side to it. As we gather to celebrate the first turn from winter to spring, we are invited to recognise and honour the beauty in the often unwanted season of winter. Let us invite our hearts to be glad for the courage winter proclaims. Let us be grateful for the wisdom winter brings in teaching us about the need for withdrawal as an essential part of renewal. Let us also encourage our spirits as Earth prepares to come forth from this time of withdrawal into a season filled with light.

The winter solstice celebrates the return of hope to our land as our planet experiences the first slow turn towards greater daylight. Soon we will welcome the return of the sun and the coming of springtime. As we do, let us remember and embrace the positive enriching aspects of winter's darkness. Pause now to sit in silence in the darkness of this space. Let this space be a safe enclosure of creative gestation for you."

May it be so for you all. **Sue Woolley**

Regional Events

**Midland Unitarian Association of Lay Preachers
And Service Leaders: Spring Training
Creating Worship Material**

Led by: Rev. Andrew Hill

When: Saturday 16th March 2013

Where: Birmingham New Meeting Unitarian Church,
Ryland St, Birmingham B16 8BL

Time: 11.00 am – 5.15 pm (coffee/tea available from 10.30 am)

Cost: Free to MUA participants



Midland Unitarian Association Annual General Meeting

When: Saturday 6th April 2013

Where: Kidderminster New Meeting House,
Church St, Kidderminster DY10 2AR

Time: 10.30 am for 11.00 am

Guest Speaker: Rev. Rob Gregson, Programme Director of
Simple Gifts

Cost: £3.00 a head (lunch)

More details about these events from Sue Woolley (see p.12)

**Banbury Unitarian Fellowship
At the Town Hall, Bridge St, Banbury OX16 5PX
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Treasurer: Don Booth
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In this time of anticipated Spring by Terasa G. Cooley

In this time of anticipated Spring, let us allow ourselves to extend the anticipation – to value the time of budding before blooming, of seeding before sprouting.

This is a time of revelation: the revealing of that which is eternal, which we see every year, but still need to be reminded to see it in a new way.

There is also the revelation of that which is new. Every Spring we encounter something never before seen. It is that very newness which embodies hope and potential for the wholeness which is yet to be.

Let us allow Spring to unfold slowly that we may appreciate the true mystery of rebirth and renewal.

Amen