

Kensington Unitarians

community - spirituality - conscience



NEWSLETTER
WINTER 2024



Welcome back!

Welcome to our church newsletter! After a few years away it's back Back BACK – now as a quarterly magazine – starting with a bumper edition to catch up on all the year's events...

**Just One
Thing...**



**Introducing
Rev Jane**



**Christmas
at Essex
Church**



www.kensington-unitarians.org.uk

Coming up...

December

Sunday 1

12.30pm Community Yoga with Hannah (in-person)
7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Wednesday 4

7pm Poetry Group with Brian (in-person)

Thursday 5

7pm Committee Meeting (online)

Friday 6

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Wednesday 11

7pm Community Singing (in-person)

Friday 13

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 15

12.30pm Community Lunch (in-person)
7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Wednesday 18

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (in-person)

Sunday 22

1.30-3.30pm Tea Dance with Rachel (in-person)

Tuesday 24

7pm Candlelit Christmas Eve (hybrid: in-person AND online)

Sunday 29

1-4pm New Year's Mini-Retreat with Jane (in-person)
7.30pm Better World Book Club: 'Golden' (online)

Please keep an eye out for last-minute additions to the programme.

Visit our website: kensington-unitarians.org.uk

January

Wednesday 1

1-4pm New Year's Mini-Retreat with Jane (online)

Friday 3

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 5

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Wednesday 8

7pm Community Singing (in-person)

Friday 10

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 12

12.30pm – Community Yoga (in-person)

Wednesday 15

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (in-person)

Thursday 16

7pm Committee Meeting (online)

Friday 17

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 19

12.30pm Find Your Voice with Margaret (in-person)
7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Wednesday 22

7pm Community Singing (in-person)

Friday 24

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 26

7.30pm Better World Book Club: 'How We Break' (online)

Friday 31

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

February

Saturday 1

Pocket FUSE: 'Theology of Mental Health' at Richmond Unitarians (in-person)

Sunday 2

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)
1-2.30pm (TBC) Many Voices LGBTQIA+ Singing for Fun (in-person)

Wednesday 5

7pm Poetry Group with Brian (in-person)

Friday 7

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 9

12.30pm – Community Yoga (in-person)

Wednesday 12

7pm Community Singing (in-person)

Friday 14

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Saturday 15

11am-4pm Engagement Group Facilitator Network – Training Day (hybrid: in-person AND online)

Sunday 16

12.30pm Find Your Voice with Margaret (in-person)
7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Wednesday 19

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (in-person)

Friday 21

7pm Heart and Soul with Jane (online)

Sunday 23

7.30pm Better World Book Club: 'Monsters' (online)

Thursday 27

7pm Committee Meeting (online)

Introducing our Minister

Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall was appointed Minister with Kensington Unitarians in May 2023.

Jane has been connected to the congregation since April 1999, first as a congregation member, then as an active volunteer, before joining the staff team as part-time Outreach Officer in 2008, and becoming full-time Ministry Coordinator in 2021, to steer the church community through a time of transition.

Jane is positively evangelical about the transformative power of engagement groups and created 'Heart and Soul' circles as a form of contemplative spiritual gathering where people can share deeply about their lives. Jane is increasingly energised by the potential of online spiritual gatherings to make our activities more accessible for those who find it hard to participate in traditional in-person services due to factors including disability, ill-health, neurodivergence, geographical isolation, work commitments, or caring responsibilities; she has first-hand

experience of several of these issues and is currently juggling her ministry role with the demands of being sole carer for her elderly father.

Jane has been very much involved in organising Hucklow Summer School, the annual Unitarian residential for adult religious education and spiritual development, since 2005. In recent years she has co-developed and co-facilitated LGBTQIA+ training on the theme of 'Working on Our Welcome', to improve the levels of awareness and sensitivity in our denomination around issues of gender, sexuality and relationship diversity, and to help make our congregations ever more hospitable. Jane also serves as a spiritual director working with people from various Christian denominations, and those who are on the fringes of faith, or outside of the mainstream religious traditions altogether.



Prior to ministry training with Unitarian College (2018-2021), she gained a first-class BA in Philosophy, Religion and Ethics, at Heythrop College (2011-2017). Jane previously worked in academic research, in the field of medical imaging and radiological sciences, gaining her PhD in the Computational Imaging Sciences Group at Guy's Hospital, King's College London. When she is not working (or glued to the internet) Jane loves gardening, birdwatching, baking, listening to podcasts and audiobooks, and making art, and she is a fanatical follower of bike racing on TV.

To contact our Minister, email: jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk



'JUST ONE THING' Showing up (& mucking in)

In this new incarnation of the church newsletter we plan to have a recurring feature called 'Just One Thing...' The idea is that each time we will suggest one small thing you might do for the benefit of our community. This time I'm calling it 'Showing Up

(and Mucking In)' – which technically, I admit, is two things – but they are quite closely connected!

We are so grateful to the team of helpers who regularly show up and muck in on Sunday mornings to help keep the show on the

road – greeting people at the door, making coffee, moving chairs, doing readings and so much more – even if you're a bit short of oomph and can't take on one of the 'official' volunteering tasks please be sure that your presence is always valued. The same goes for showing up regularly online and engaging with the wider congregation via our small group activities.

It warms the heart to come in on a Sunday morning and see familiar faces – and of course it is always a delight to welcome new faces too! – so if you haven't been along to a service lately why not come along and reconnect with the community. As we attempt to build the congregation and reach out to more people it makes a real difference if we have a healthy number of regulars

to offer hospitality and a friendly welcome to any newcomers who are brave enough to come in and give us a try.

If you do feel able to help out with greeting or coffee our chairperson Liz Tuckwell would be very pleased to hear from you! She organises the rota and is on the lookout for helpers. Have a word on Sunday or email chair@kensington-unitarians.org.uk. If you could help with co-hosting please let Jane know and she'll connect you with Charlotte who organises the Zoom rota.

Thanks for all you do – by showing up and mucking in – to help our beloved community towards a thriving future!

Jane

Getting to Know You... Patricia Brewerton



My arrival into this world coincided with the beginning of the blitz on London in 1940 and one of the first sounds my new-born ears would have heard was the explosion which demolished Maryland station not far from the hospital in Forest Gate, East London, where I was born. I

grew up in a large and vibrant working-class family in East London, surrounded by cousins, aunts, uncles, grand and great-grand-parents. My parents, however, were both devout Christians and when my father returned from service overseas, we began a church routine which lasted until my late teens. My father was a gentle, loving man but the church we attended was very narrow in its outlook and, I realised as I grew up, very right wing.

In my late teens I stopped going to Church and became more interested in politics than religion. Then in the 1970s one of my children started to attend Sunday School at a United Reformed Church and, concerned about what he was being taught, I turned up to morning service one Sunday and found a different kind of church, one which was more liberal and with a faith which was less based on fear of punishment. I had missed being part of a church community and this seemed the right place for me at that time. But I remained, and remain, very interested and active in politics.

I don't think of myself as a particularly spiritual person. I try to live out my faith in a practical way by supporting people and causes I can see are trying to make the world a better place. I am not even sure whether I believe in a God, but I want with all my heart to think that there is a power bigger than humankind which shows us how to love and act justly. I think as one gets older one's beliefs develop and change, and I had long felt a need for a more questioning church than one where the Bible was the only source of truth. I had already encountered and was interested in Unitarianism. So, when my church in Bloomsbury was forced to close in July 2020 and I was looking for another community to belong to, I zoomed into Essex Church. That was October 2020 and before long I was zooming in every Sunday morning.

Here I found a place where I could belong. Sunday morning services offer a spirituality mixed with real world matters. They provide time for me to ponder the world and my place in it. Whether people are together in person or on-line there is music to enjoy and words to inspire and a loving supportive community to be part of. It is where I want to be on Sunday morning. I have also enjoyed various on-line congregational activities and am looking forward to those planned for the future. These provide the opportunity for the whole hybrid congregation to meet and get to know one another.



Poetry Group

4 December & 5 February, 7-8.30pm

(Wednesday evening, once a month. No meeting in January)

Our poetry sharing group meets in-person on the first Wednesday in each month (with a winter break – there will be no gathering in January). Bring along a favourite poem to read on any subject. Maybe it'll be a poem you have written yourself, one you've just discovered, or a poem you've known for many years. Let us know if you plan to come and send a copy of your choices to Brian (brian.ellis@outlook.com) so they can be printed for everyone.



Festive Tea Dance

22 December, 1.30-3.30pm

Tea, cake, partner dancing (Ballroom and Latin), and a few line dances – all are welcome – from complete beginners to life-long dancers. Even if you think you have two left feet, don't worry, this will be a relaxed and welcoming space for all to enjoy (there'll be a social dance lesson for complete beginners led by Rachel Sparks at the start of the afternoon). We encourage gender-neutral dance partnering which means that anyone can lead or follow. There's no need to bring a dance partner so just come as you are. This event is free of charge; donations will be invited in support of 'Say it Loud Club' (charity for LGBTQ+ Asylum Seekers and Refugees). Help with baking and hosting welcomed.



Christmas at Essex Church

You are very welcome to join our festive celebrations. Our main Sunday morning Christmas Carol service will be on 15 December at 11 am, featuring special music from our quartet of singers, and followed by a bring-and-share lunch. We will also hold our traditional Candlelit Christmas Eve service after dark at 5pm on 24 December, followed by time for mince pies. You're most welcome to bring along friends and family – the more the merrier – to celebrate Christmas with our community.

One Light Gatherings

10 Dec, 14 Jan, 11 Feb, 7.30pm

(Second Tuesday of the month, meeting at Essex Church)

OneLight Gathering is a welcoming circle whose sacred lineage is heart and soul connection, open to any faith or none. It is an offering from the compassionate heart to nourish and restore you. There is singing, readings, sharings, and a creative altar-building ceremony on universal themes that touch all lives. You will find warmth, sustenance, kindness, inspiration and encouragement. Free (donations welcome to cover costs of materials used, snacks and to offer half to the church).

For more information contact Alison:
contact@onelightgathering.co.uk

Mini-Retreat: New Year's Reflection

We will hold online and in-person options:

Sunday 29 December, 1-4pm, in-person at church
Wednesday 1 January, 1-4pm, online via Zoom

Book your place now for a New Year's mini-retreat, led by our minister, Jane Blackall. We will take a few hours to look back on 2024 and look forward to 2025. Spend some quiet time in gently guided personal reflection before coming back together to share with others at the end of the afternoon.

People of all faiths and none are welcome (no particular beliefs are assumed or required to participate). Advance booking is essential (we need six people to go ahead): email jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk to sign up ASAP.

SAVE THE DATES for our hybrid mini-retreats in 2025:
2 March, 15 June, 21 September, and 28 December 2025.

Stay in the loop...

If you would like to be kept informed about upcoming events we encourage you to sign up for our weekly email bulletin. Every Friday afternoon we send out an update with a Zoom link for the Sunday's service and reminders about what's on in the week ahead (and forthcoming events you might like to sign up for). Sign up via our website: www.kensington-unitarians.org.uk





Community Lunch

Sunday 15 December
(after the service)

All are welcome to this simple bring-and-share lunch. We hold community lunches about once a quarter after a service. Let Patricia, who is coordinating our December lunch, know if you are planning to come along and what food or drink you are intending to bring (or contact our minister jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk). We are always glad of volunteers to help with the washing up afterwards!

Getting to Know You...

Helen Marshall



My name is Helen, I'm in my 40s and living in NW London. I'm disabled with complex health issues and have been housebound for many years,

so finding out about online Unitarian gatherings with Kensington Unitarians has been extremely welcome, as without online contact with others my world becomes very small and isolating.

My partner, Emma, and I first discovered the Unitarians by chance in the spring of 2023, my interest having been piqued by an article in the Guardian referencing three faith organisations that currently provide same-sex wedding ceremonies (The Quakers, Unitarians, and Methodists). We had been attending online Quaker Meetings for Worship for about a year and half up until then. I was intrigued by the inclusion of the Unitarians. I'd heard the name, but realised I knew little else, so I went on a bit of a deep dive on the internet and soon discovered the Kensington Unitarians. Although we'd found some elements of Quaker life to be nourishing, there were ways in which it wasn't quite the right fit for us.

I made enquiries with Rev. Jane Blackall

and began attending both the online Friday evening Heart & Soul meetings, and the Sunday morning hybrid service at Essex Church via Zoom. We were warmly received at our first meeting, and haven't looked back.

Within the Unitarians, we've discovered a group of like-minded people, where even virtually there's a strong sense of community and care. There are some specific factors of my life, for example being autistic and queer, that have made me feel somewhat adrift at times in other religious settings. I have always been passionately moved by ideas of total acceptance and affirmation rather than merely tolerance. In such previous settings, I have found myself self-editing in order to avoid encountering negative reactions from others, which in my experience has sometimes impacted my sense of meaningful engagement with 'community'. The ethos of Unitarians is one that really appeals to me, with their history of LGBTQ+ inclusivity being a powerful force in our journey so far. Also, a really wonderful surprise has been just how many other autistic and neurodivergent people we've met through Essex Church. Both Emma and I are autistic, as well as many within our wider families. We are, unfortunately, too accustomed to being treated as outsiders in other social spaces, but with the Unitarians, we feel we're amongst friends. This is likely down to the most striking thing about attending Unitarian gatherings: just how authentic the connections are. It is a place of

immediate open hearts, where a bunch of friendly people who have neither the time, energy, nor the inclination to turn up as anything but themselves, come together to explore new ways of strengthening rootedness, and belonging. I've found the absence of façade and ego to be particularly refreshing.

The prayer group and the sermons give something different, but both are united by a willingness to perceive in each other and the world goodness, hope, and love, and I need that more than ever in my life right now, particularly as the world has felt an increasingly difficult and hostile place to exist in over recent years. I'm encouraged by a collective consciousness that invites me weekly to put my best foot forward and to aim to be better in my day-to-day living... for myself, and those around me.

I'm sad to have never been able to attend the Sunday service in person, not least because I'm taunted weekly by descriptions of incredible cakes that Jane has conjured up for those in-person to enjoy! But also because I'd like opportunities to meet more of the congregation. Hopefully in time there will be more chances to do that. I'm so very grateful to the efforts that go into making the service such a professional, seamless hybrid event. As someone who has very limited mobility (both physically and socially) the Kensington Unitarians have become a virtual lifeline.

Introducing our Warden



I am a Romanian native, and I have lived in the UK for over 20 years, and I now have dual nationalities. Before joining Essex Church as warden I already worked in the building – managing the Lloyd

Williamson Nursery downstairs in the basement for 10 years – so the transition to looking after the entire building was very appealing and enjoyable to me. I have met some wonderful people, and I am very happy to be part of the community that brings me so much joy!

You can contact Ramona by, email: warden@kensington-unitarians.org.uk



Community Singing

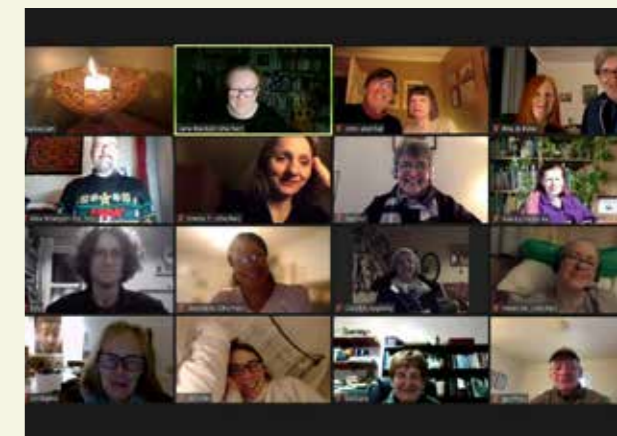
27 Nov, 11 Dec, 8 & 22 Jan, 12 & 26 Feb, 7-9pm

(Second and fourth Wednesdays of each month at Essex Church)

These sessions are sometimes subject to last-minute changes – please sign up with jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk to be kept updated.

Join our community singing group at Kensington Unitarians. All abilities welcome! The group is led by an experienced musician who has been leading a similar group in the neighbourhood for the last 20 years and who now wants to extend the invitation by creating a sister group for our Unitarian community and beyond. This is not a choir that will perform; it's just for the joy of singing together as a regular practice. We will sing a mix of pop, country, gospel and folk, all sung a capella. We will sing from lyric sheets, not scores, so there is no need to be able to read music. Our group leader is expert in bringing everyone's contribution into a joyful whole; whether you are new to singing or a professional musician, there is a place for all voices.

Drop in to one of these free and friendly sessions at Essex Church. We ask that if you have symptoms of respiratory illness (e.g. sore throat, runny nose, coughs) you stay home to help keep everyone safe and well.



Heart and Soul Contemplative Spiritual Gatherings

Heart and Soul is a contemplative spiritual gathering in which you can take time to reflect on life in the company of others. These gatherings have been running for over a decade in-person at Essex Church and also more recently online via Zoom. Sessions follow a reassuringly regular pattern, with readings and music from a range of sources, time for guided prayers of gratitude, compassion for others, self-reflection, and silent meditation. Each session closes with refreshments, relaxed conversation, and an opportunity to get to know others at a deeper level.

Online: Every Sunday and Friday, 7pm

Online gatherings are every Friday at 7pm and twice a month on Sundays at 7pm (first and third Sunday of the month). Email jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk for more information and to sign up for a session.

In-person 18 Dec, 15 Jan, 19 Feb, 7pm

(Third Wednesday of each month at Essex Church)

In-person gatherings on the Third Wednesday of each month. We ask that if you have symptoms of respiratory illness (e.g. sore throat, runny nose, coughs) you stay home to help keep everyone safe and well. Do email Jane to let her know you're planning to attend (jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk).



Getting to Know You... David Brewerton

You may have noticed that from time to time there's a white-haired old chap sitting in the front row of the congregation, almost in front of the screen. Well, that's me, David, husband for over six decades of your treasured Treasurer, Patricia.



I look harmless enough, but I've always been a member of the awkward squad, never quite fitting in. Patricia has rarely been without a church to attend. I've tagged along over the years because I value the idea of community that is part and parcel of church congregations but have neatly side stepped the religious bit. I confess I have not always kept my feelings under control.

When I tagged along online to Kensington Unitarians, it was because Patricia led me there. I already belonged, and still belong, to New Unity, the Unitarian church on Newington Green, a centre of dissent over centuries. There I found I could enjoy a sort of spiritual communion with others, but be under no obligation to believe, well, anything other than the power of love.

But it also gave me a wormhole into Citizens UK, a community organising movement dedicated to making change and calling the powerful to account. If I am honest, this was the major motivation for joining New Unity. My working career had been as a Fleet Street journalist, where my job was to question, make uncomfortable, if necessary, the rich and the powerful and write about them. I loved it, and quite missed the thrill of the chase when I retired. Citizens, through New Unity, gave me some of that back. It still does.

Sitting beside Patricia while she Zoomed in to online Essex Church gave me something else. I came to see that this was a strong and loving community. That while the members may be small in number, they were big in heart. They looked out and cared for one another.

Sure, there was often a sprinkling of the divine, but I could let that pass me by. Treat it as metaphor. Maybe it's not where I am, but does that really matter?

What Essex Church, in the care taken to make the morning service a whole experience that can be enjoyed no matter where one sits on the religious spectrum, in the genuine friendship of its people, offers to me is a sanctuary of peace in a turbulent world. That is why I have become a regular member of the congregation.

And the faith it inspires, if indeed that is what faith is, empowers me to continue to do what little I can to try to bend that long arc of the universe towards the justice that lies at the heart of Unitarianism.



Community Yoga with Hannah

1 Dec, 12 Jan, 9 Feb, 12.30pm (After the service)

Come along for a gentle and relaxing, one-hour Hatha yoga class to help reduce stress and get your body moving. No prior experience is necessary, no advance sign-up required, and all levels welcome. Mats are provided, but do wear comfortable clothing that you can move in.

Interested, but not in London? Hannah also teaches free, virtual yoga sessions on Mondays (5:30-6:30pm via Zoom). Contact Hannah for full details: hannahmarieking@gmail.com



Finding Your Voice – Monthly Singing Classes

19 Jan, 16 Feb, 16 March, 12.30-1.15pm

(Sunday lunchtime, once a month)

These relaxed and fun singing classes are for anyone who is prepared to open their mouth and make a sound. Using a few simple exercises you'll gain joy and confidence in singing. Classes are led by Margaret, an experienced and encouraging teacher, who has worked as a professional singer all her adult life. Drop in to one of these free and friendly sessions at Essex Church.

Better World Book Club



The fourth Sunday of each month, 7.30-9.30pm on Zoom

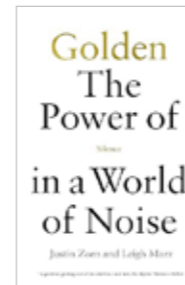
Through 2024 we've been running a 'Better World Book Club' which meets once a month on Zoom. The books have been chosen to cover a range of social issues we might do well to be more informed about, interleaved with books on spiritual and ethical matters, on living well in hard times. In order to make this as accessible as possible we aim to choose titles that are available in print, e-book, and audiobook formats, and we will buy a few copies for the church library for people to borrow. Although it's great to have people joining the group on a regular basis you are also most welcome to 'drop in' for a particular book that appeals to you.

Please email Jane to let her know if you're planning to join and for further details. See contact details on p3

Sunday 29 December:

Golden: The Power of Silence in a World of Noise by Justin Zorn and Leigh Marz

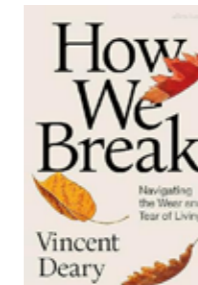
'What if the most serious personal and global challenges won't be solved with more thinking or talking? The world is louder than ever. It's not just the noise in our ears, but also the noise on our screens and in our heads. 'Silence is golden,' the adage goes. But how do we find it in times like these? Justin Zorn and Leigh Marz take us on an unlikely journey exploring why silence is essential for physical health, mental clarity, professional fulfilment, nourishing relationships, ecological sustainability and vibrant community. Drawing on lessons from neuroscience, philosophy, business, politics, activism and the arts, Golden teaches us how to go beyond the ordinary rules and offers tools of mindfulness to help individuals, organisations and societies dial down the noise and reclaim pristine quiet.'



Sunday 26 January:

How We Break: Navigating the Wear and Tear of Living by Vincent Deary

'What happens when our minds and bodies are pushed beyond their limits? Vincent Deary has spent years helping patients cope with whatever life has thrown at them. He has written a book for all of us who sometimes feel we have reached our breaking point. Drawing on clinical case studies, cutting-edge scientific research, intimate personal stories and references from philosophy, literature and film, this book offers a consoling new vision of everyday human struggle. The big traumas in life are relatively rare. More common is when too many things go wrong at once, or we are exposed to prolonged periods of difficulty or precarity. When the world shrinks to nothing but our daily coping, we become unhappy, worried, hopeless, exhausted. By equipping us with a better understanding of what happens to us when we're struggling to cope, and making a bold case for the power of rest and recuperation, How We Break helps chart a path through difficult times.'



Sunday 23 February:

Monsters: What Do We Do with Great Art by Bad People by Claire Dederer

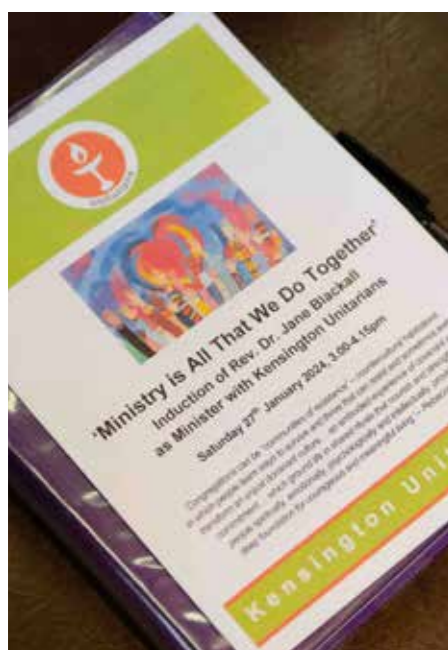
'A passionate, provocative and blisteringly smart interrogation of how we experience art in the age of #MeToo, and whether we can separate an artist's work from their biography. What do we do with the art of monstrous men? Can we love the work of Roman Polanski and Michael Jackson, Hemingway and Picasso? Should we love it? Does genius deserve special dispensation? Is history an excuse? What makes women artists monstrous? And what should we do with beauty, and with our unruly feelings about it? Claire Dederer explores these questions and our relationships with the artists whose behaviour disrupts our ability to apprehend the work on its own terms. She interrogates her own responses and her own behaviour, and she pushes the fan, and the listener, to do the same.'





Induction Service, January '24

On 27 January 2024 we held an Induction Service marking the official commencement of Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall's ministry with Kensington Unitarians (twenty-five years after she first arrived at Essex Church and became a member of the congregation). This special occasion was an opportunity for community members and friends from far and wide, those who have supported Jane and the Essex Church congregation along the way, to gather in celebration and show their support for the future ministry and mission of this church. Many thanks to Hannah King for these photographs which capture the atmosphere of this marvellous day.



250 years of Essex Church

On the 17th April 1774 Theophilus Lindsey led the very first service at the first avowedly Unitarian chapel in Britain, the Essex Street Chapel, just off the Strand...

There is a direct line from that pioneering congregation to our own congregation here in Kensington (that's why we're also known as Essex Church). Our special anniversary service was co-led by our current minister, Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall, and our former minister, Rev. Sarah Tinker.

Jane reflected on what we have in common with those early Unitarians who founded the congregation:

'Sometimes, these days, you hear Unitarians dismissed as people who can 'believe what they like'. But it's more accurate to say that we 'believe what we must'. And Theophilus Lindsey, and those early Unitarians who gathered at the Essex Street Chapel, must have been driven by something deep in order to pursue this new way of doing religion when it was counter-cultural, against the grain, illegal. They weren't prepared to sign up to the required dogmas of the mainstream church – they were compelled by their conscience to think for themselves – to seek truth was a moral imperative. For each and every person to be free and unconstrained in their search for meaning – that really meant something to them – perhaps to a degree that we slightly take for granted nowadays, 250 years on... What we have in common is not the shape of our worship, especially, and not even specific beliefs... it's more about the approach we have to life's big questions, and our commitment to an ongoing, ever-unfolding, process of religious discovery – an honest search for truth and meaning – and a sincere quest to live good and virtuous lives – to help bring about justice, peace, and a better world for all. The continuity of this congregation over the last 250 years rests on this shared process and purpose – our mission – the outward forms have changed quite a bit but this is the constant heart of our faith.'

These opening words adapted from a piece Rev. Cliff Reed describe the purpose we share:

The purpose of religion is
to create loving community;
to foster relationships of mutual caring and respect;
to nurture the human spirit;
and to comfort, challenge, and inspire us, as the need arises.

The purpose of religion is
to seek and find a moral compass for the soul;
to make responsible use of the mind's powers;
to help us become good stewards of God's green earth;
and to be humble explorers of the universe.

The purpose of religion is
to celebrate life in its fullness;
to follow in the footsteps of those who have



taught and lived the better way for humankind;
and to uphold the universal values that make for
peace, justice, and happiness the world over.

The purpose of religion is
to free itself from inhumanity, bigotry, and empty dogma;
and to serve the cause of human welfare in a
global commonwealth, with joy and compassion.

So as we gather together in religious community this morning,
may we remember these noble purposes around which we gather,
and re-commit ourselves to carrying this free faith onward,
together.

How to make a donation

Your donation will help us continue our work and keep our progressive religious message out in the world. Our annual budget is around £180,000. That's around £3,500 running costs each week to pay for our staff team, run our programme of activities, and maintain our building.

A monthly standing order is the simplest way to support the church. A one-off donation by cheque or bank transfer is always most welcome. You can also set up regular payments via PayPal. Perhaps you might consider leaving a legacy donation in your will. Further details, including a Gift Aid form, are available on our website: www.kensington-unitarians.org.uk/get-involved

Thank you to everyone who has made a donation or taken out a standing order to support the work of this church. Your generosity is much appreciated! Your contributions will help keep our progressive spiritual message out in the world.

Let us eat Cake...



Cake has become a regular feature of Sundays at Essex Church! Here are just a few that we've enjoyed in recent months. Have we got any other secret bakers in the congregation who might like to bring along some treats to share?

Engagement Group Facilitator Network – Training Day

Saturday 15 February, 11 am-4pm
at Essex Church (this will be a hybrid event so you can join online)

In February we will be hosting a special training day to launch a new network for Unitarian Engagement Group Facilitators. Whether you are an experienced facilitator, or just taking your first steps in facilitation, or even just tentatively thinking that you might like to lead such groups in future then this will be a worthwhile day for you to join up with other practitioners and engage with a network of peer support in which we can share ideas, insights, and best practice.

Engagement Groups are a very particular style of Unitarian small-group activity which has the intention to enrich the spiritual life of participants, cultivate right relationship, create community, and deepen participants' connection to each other and to their congregation. Creating and holding these sacred spaces require specialist facilitation skills, and a deeper understanding of the philosophy behind them, so even if you consider yourself an experienced facilitator there is always more to learn.

The training day will be led by Jane Blackall with help from Sarah Tinker, Kate Dean, Michael Allured, Lizzie Kingston-Harrison, and more TBC. Please contact Jane to let her know if you are planning to come: jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk

Nia Dance

Holistic movement and Dance at Essex Church

Rediscover the joy of movement and the meaning of true fitness! Nia is holistic movement for body and soul. It is an expressive movement practice promoting fitness, creativity, and wellbeing. Nia classes combine the grace and expressiveness of dance, the power and explosiveness of martial arts, and the wisdom and stillness of yoga and tai chi. Nia provides a holistic workout and leaves you feeling energised, relaxed and centred. It suits any level of fitness, age, and experience, working from where you are now. To find out about Nia see: www.nianow.com

Nia Dance resumes from 10 January, weekly in-person on Fridays from 12.30-1.30pm. £10 per session (or £40 for 5 classes). Or online on Wednesdays at 12.30pm.

For more information contact Sonya Leite on 020 7371 1674 or email sleite@hotmail.co.uk

Kensington Choir

Monday evenings 7-8.35pm, Essex Church

The choir is a 30+ strong SATB four-part harmony choir based in West London. The singers all share a passion for singing and enjoy all the aspects that come with being a part of a choir; well-being, improved breathing, focus on musicality, friendship, delving into historical music periods and singing soulful music. Kensington Choir repertoire is vast and varied and sometimes includes classical pieces, spirituals and Christmas music. Join us to sing an eclectic mix of music, meet new people, and have fun!

Try a FREE taster session! Term dates and membership information on the website (www.kensingtonchoir.com) or email roseanna@kensingtonchoir.com



Hucklow Summer School: 'Finding Our Religion'

Save the dates: 15-22 August 2025

Save the dates for the 30th Anniversary edition of Hucklow Summer School when the theme will be 'Finding Our Religion'. Once again our congregation will be well represented at the event, with Jane and Charlotte on the organising team and facilitating a group, and Sarah contributing to one of the theme talks, and we'd love to have more of you join us next year.



Hucklow Summer School is an annual Unitarian religious education gathering held each August at the Nightingale Centre, Great Hucklow, in the Peak District (with a limited parallel programme accessible online). Summer School focuses on matters of religion and spirituality and intends to draw out and develop the potential of all participants. We aim to provide a balanced programme, offering a rich mix of activities for both the heart and head, and a variety of optional sessions showcasing activities which participants might "take home" and try out in their own communities. We also ensure that there are plenty of opportunities for relaxed fellowship and fun during the week. Summer School brings Unitarians together and allows them to get to know each other deeply and form lasting connections.

Full details of the programme will be out by Christmas (we'll make an announcement in the Friday email when the event is officially launched or you can keep an eye on the summer school website at www.hucklowsummerschool.co.uk). We expect demand for places to be high at this special anniversary event so you'd be well advised to get your application in early.

General Assembly of Unitarians and Free Christians - Annual Meetings 2025

Our national gathering of Unitarians and Free Christians ('The GA') will take place from Saturday 12 to Monday 14 April 2025 at the Birmingham Hilton Metropole Hotel. The GA features worship, workshops, keynote speeches, and a chance to keep abreast of the issues we are collectively engaging with. This is a great way to get a sense of the wider movement and make connections with fellow Unitarians from across the country and indeed worldwide. The committee are keen to encourage more congregation members to attend so if you're a member who might be interested in going along next year please do get in touch with Jane or any committee member to find out more. The deadline for bookings is 14 March.



How to become a member

Membership is about affirming your personal commitment to this community and the Unitarian ethos. Each member is a vital and valued part of this church and its mission and its work in the world. Membership does not depend on your financial contribution to the work of the church (though of course we are very grateful for your regular donations, which help to make possible the ongoing work of the congregation, particularly during these economically challenging times).

If you are relatively new to this community, we ask you to attend and engage with our Sunday services or other activities for three months (in-person or online) before applying to join, so that you can get to know the congregation, develop a sense of belonging, and discern whether it is right for you. New members are formally approved by the committee and personally welcomed by the minister and chair at our annual membership service. Please contact our minister if you think you would like to join.

If you are already a member of this church, we ask you to re-confirm your membership each year, ahead of our membership service and AGM which takes place in spring. Thank you for your support!

Two Poems by Brian Ellis

Kensington Cemetery, Hanwell

once a lonely place
now ceded to the city
in the hours of light
ceaseless sounds of life
confound the promises
of peace written on stone
until darkness confuses
day to lay silence over
the graves - rest for the
souls that wander here
on the paths to eternity



Rembrandt drawing: A girl sleeping

a girl rests weary
sleeping lightly –
his unforgiving brush on
white and waiting page
hasty lines and slides
of wash swiftly made
before she wakes
to break the muse's spell
no more than minutes
of a master's hand and
eye pass through time
that I can watch
her body gently move
a stray hair across
her face dance
in her breath

Photograph by Philafrenzy
Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0

Getting to Know You...

Emma Taylor



My name is Emma, I live in Harrow with my family, and have been attending both Heart & Soul and Sunday services, remotely, since

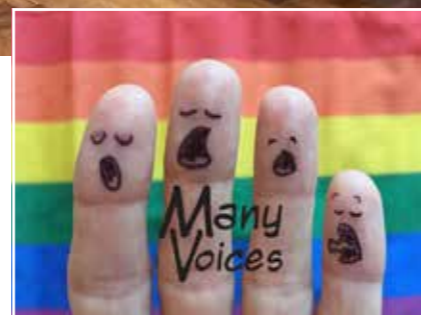
around April last year. My partner Helen and I had been attending online Quaker meetings together for some time, and we appreciated the shared stillness and spiritual focus, but I also missed some other elements of the religious traditions I'd grown up with in the Church of England, particularly the use of music. When Helen happened to come across a mention of Unitarians in a news article, she followed her curiosity down a trail that ended up with us attending Heart & Soul together and immediately feeling warmly welcomed. I was so impressed by the openness of everyone there, their willingness to talk vulnerably about difficult experiences without feeling the need to tie every story up neatly with a moral and a happy ending. The experience of

attending every week, hearing the joys and difficulties of people's lives, and sharing my own and having them so kindly held in mind, meant I felt almost instantly part of a community. Meeting so many queer and/or neurodivergent people within Essex Church has also contributed to that unexpected and beautiful sense of belonging.

I'm really touched by the enormous efforts Essex Church has made to allow remote participation, with online attenders not just spectators but really feeling part of the congregation and services. One of my children is disabled and seriously ill, meaning it's almost impossible for me to be away from home for any length of time. Regularly attending any kind of religious groups or services is out of the question for me unless I can do it remotely, but I've encountered organisations where this access has been granted begrudgingly or doled out in carefully-rationed quantities. Now I am able to connect with people across the UK and elsewhere every week for Friday night Heart & Soul, in an atmosphere just as warm and intimate as if we were all in the same room, and I can take part in Sunday morning services without

having to choose between my own needs and those of my family.

I grew up in the Church of England, and my faith was really shaped by both the Church and the C of E school I attended through my teens. Between them, and the Christians in my family, I witnessed (and joined in with) an enormous range of ways of experiencing and expressing faith, whether silent meditation or volunteer work, solemn choral evensong services or festivals full of electric guitars, discussion groups or praying with one other person. I still love the richness of this experience, that there are so many different ways to meet God and each other, and it has been wonderful to encounter a huge diversity of beliefs and spiritual practices within the Unitarian community, along with a shared moral compass. It matters enormously to me that faith isn't just a personal experience, but an inclination to action, a set of values put into practice that continually make the world better even in very tiny ways. I feel like in Unitarians, whatever each person's specific spiritual beliefs, I have met a group of people who share those core values.



Many Voices LGBTQIA+ Singing

It has been a delight to host the long-running LGBTQIA+ singing group Many Voices at Essex Church over the last few years.

Many Voices was founded by our good friends Gaynor and Tati who describe what they offer as follows: 'We are London's LGBTQIA+ non-performing singing group. Many Voices began in 2013 as a "sing-for-fun" group for LGBTQIA+ people and their friends. Lesbian, gay, bi, trans and gender diverse, intersex, ace, queer and questioning people, and our allies, are welcome. We just sing because we like it, it makes us feel great, and we love the sense of connection and

community that it brings. We're not a choir – we don't perform, we don't rehearse – so sessions are more like one-off workshops. Typically, we begin with warming up our bodies and voices (nothing strenuous), and sing short rounds, call-and-response, ditties, shanties, songs from different genres, traditions and cultures. The emphasis is on enjoyment rather than perfection – though there is often a wonderful sense of awe when we've sung something beautiful, or of achievement when we've learned something more challenging! We teach all the songs by ear, so there's no need to be able to read music. If you like to sing in the car or the shower, or

if you haven't sung since school but would like to try, you are assured of a warm and friendly welcome. No commitment required, no auditions, no performances, no pressure!' (for more information see www.many-voices.co.uk)

We hope Many Voices will return in 2025 (you might like to provisionally save the date for 2 February... dates to be confirmed)

YouTube Channel

Our Sunday services are all archived on our YouTube channel (www.youtube.com/@kensingtonunitarians) so you can catch up on any you've missed or search through the archive (going back to summer 2020) to find services on a particular theme. Maybe you could share the link with friends who are curious about our community and the Unitarian approach to faith.

InTouch WhatsApp Group

You may not be aware that we have a community 'InTouch' group on WhatsApp – there's not a huge amount of traffic on it – but we share little bits of personal news, last-minute reminders about church activities, and photos (often of delightful things we have spotted out in nature). It's a gentle space for checking in and encouraging each other rather than debating contentious issues. If you're a member or friend of the congregation and would like to be added to the group just get in touch with Jane: jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk



The Chalice Challenge

A challenge for the creative writers in our congregation...

We'd love you to have a go at writing your own chalice lighting words – please do send them in to jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk – we'll include a selection in future editions of the newsletter (and we could also submit them to be considered for inclusion on the General Assembly's new Worship Words website).

The usual criteria for a chalice lighting would be:

- Not too long! In the range 60-120 words.
- Attributing a symbolism to the lighting of the flame.
- Affirming the purpose of our gathering as Unitarians.
- Highlighting some key shared values of Unitarians.
- (optionally) linking to some particular season/theme that we might have a service about during the course of a year e.g. Christmas, Easter, Flower Communion, Membership, Gathering the Waters, Pride, Solstice, Equinox, etc.

We've already had a few offerings from our very own Marianne Harvey. And here are a few other examples to give you an idea:

'A Beacon of Hope' by Christine Robinson

We gather this hour as people of faith with joys and sorrows, gifts and needs. We light this little beacon of hope, sign of our quest for truth and meaning, in celebration of this precious life we share together.

'Our Guiding Principles' by Jane Blackall

May the light of this chalice be a reminder of the shared values and principles around which we gather: upholding the inherent worth and dignity of every person; cherishing all those diverse creatures and habitats with whom we share this Earth, our home; seeking human liberation and flourishing; serving the common good of all.

May this little light, and all it represents, make a home in our hearts; where it will ever guide us back to our highest aspirations, and help us be responsive, creative, just, and loving, in this complex and ever-changing world.



'The Light of this Chalice' by Alan G. Deale

The light of this chalice is a frail thing. It may flicker in the face of trouble and anxiety. It can be snuffed out by the winds of cynicism and apathy. May its little flame be a reminder of the power of the spirit. Let us rededicate ourselves to bringing the light that lifts our hearts and increases the world's joy.

'May the Light Shine Bright in Our Heart' by Marianne Harvey

May the light of this chalice shine bright in our heart and reverberate to all those we touch. May the homeless find shelter, may the cold find warmth, may the hungry be nourished, may the persecuted be protected, may the sick be healed and may all children be safe.

'The Light is You and I' by Marianne Harvey

This Light that shines so bright Is grace, is love, care, compassion, justice, generosity. This light is you and I, all of us one.



Minister's Reflection: 'Growing Up'

A reflection from the service on 4 August 2024 – join us for services each Sunday, 11 am-noon

Reading: 'Spare Me, Please, from Growing Up' by Brian Bilston

Spare me, please, from growing up, from tax returns, from self-help books, from laundry piles, from lawns to mow, from how to choose the right merlot.

Save me, please, from adulthood, from not doing things I want but should, from dieting, from aching joints, from Question Time, from PowerPoint.

Deliver me from refuse sacks, from dinner sets, from overdrafts, from bus stop chats about the weather, from B&Q, from knowing better.

Pardon me from pension plans, from mingling, from shaking hands, from duty, sense and all that stuff – spare me, please, from growing up.

I wanted to open with this poem from Brian Bilston as it speaks of that ambivalence that many of us seem to feel – whatever our age – about the prospect of 'growing up'. It echoes the tension between those two quotes I shared at the start of the service – St Paul lifting up this image of spiritual maturity as 'putting away childish things' – and C.S. Lewis' splendid response that when he became a man he 'put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up.' There's something paradoxical going on here. There is something important about 'putting away childish things' – but we need to unpack that a bit, I reckon – and there might be some childish things we would do well not to put away entirely...

As Moya Sarner said, in the piece Hannah read for us earlier, a lot of the traditional markers of 'growing up', those external life events that can be recorded by the Office for National Statistics, are increasingly out of reach, or pushed back to later in life, for the younger generations (and indeed the currently middle-aged, as I can attest). The economic and social realities of life under

late-capitalism mean that it's much harder to tick off those markers of homeownership, marriage, kids. Or perhaps it's that more of us have broken free of those default expectations, that conveyor belt of adult life, and no longer feel it's desirable to follow that traditional script? Maybe it's a bit of both.

In some cultures the transition from childhood to adulthood is more formally acknowledged. There is a time, typically in the teenage years, when some kind of ritual takes place to collectively affirm this significant milestone. I was interested to read this take from the psychoanalyst James Hollis who writes: 'each civilization evolved rites of passage designed to ensure the transition from the naïveté and dependency of childhood to adult sensibilities that sacrifice comfort and sloth in service to the common interest. When we examine contemporary culture, we find these rites of passage missing. Aging alone does not do it Sooner or later, we are each called to face what we fear, respond to our summons to show up, and overcome the vast lethargic powers within us. This is what is asked of us, to show up as the

person we really are, as best we can manage, under circumstances over which we may have no control. This showing up as best we can is growing up. That is all that life really asks of us: to show up as best we can.' Words from James Hollis.

But as we heard from Moya Sarner in our first reading: Growing up is not really a one-time thing – as powerful as such ritual moments and rites of passage might be (and they are very important in crystallising a shift in consciousness for both the child at the centre of the ritual and the community around them) – we don't just switch from child to adult overnight. We each experience many 'grow-ups' through the course of our life – it never ends really – and that process of 'growing up' involves a number of internal shifts. I'm just going to highlight a few dimensions in which these shifts take place, those which seem particularly significant to me: around practical wisdom, responsibility, complexity, and acceptance of some of life's limits.

First up, practical wisdom – this goes by many different names – it was singled out as the greatest of the cardinal virtues by no less than Saint Thomas Aquinas and in that context it can be defined as 'the ability to discern the appropriate course of action to be taken in a given situation at the appropriate time, with consideration of potential consequences'. In other words: knowhow. It's something that we accumulate over time, with a bit of luck, once we've been around the block a bit. But actually – it takes more than luck – in order to learn, to develop good judgement, to know and do better next time around, we need to pay attention, be reflective, integrate our experiences. When Moya Sarner rings her mum to ask what to do about a bin full of maggots – she's calling on her practical wisdom – she knows that her mum will have already 'been there and got the T-shirt'.

Another dimension of growing up is taking on responsibility. The bits of adulthood that Brian Bilston described as 'duty, sense and all that stuff'. This one is quite prominent in my mind lately. Most of you know that I never left home – I've lived with my dad my whole life and he died just a couple of months ago – and he always dealt with most of the household affairs. So, at the age of 49, I've just started getting to grips with Council Tax and water meters

and contents insurance for the first time. More generally though, I think of this as the aspect of growing up that's all about realising that 'somebody else isn't going to sort this out' and 'it's up to me now'. Also, I suppose, it's about taking on board that our actions (or inaction) have consequences for ourselves and those around us, and we need to be reflective and aware about our likely impact on others (for good or ill). This is about much more than domestic arrangements – it's about being a citizen – being engaged in our community – realising that there is not some separate class of people who run the world and get things done. If we want to create a better world – if we want good things to exist – we need to roll up our sleeves and get stuck in. When I was

"We each experience many 'grow-ups' through the course of our life – it never ends really – and that process of 'growing up' involves a number of internal shifts."

just 25 or 26, and I'd only been at this church for a year, there was a big kerfuffle (I'll spare you the historic details of church politics) which meant we had nobody to stand as chair of the congregation. And I remember thinking 'I love this church, and I want it to thrive, and if I don't step up who will?' It seemed quite preposterous that I should take on such a responsible role at such a young age. But I did it, even though I felt out of my depth, and that was a big step in my own growing-up.

Another dimension of growing up – one that seems increasingly important to me – is around acknowledging the complexity of life (particularly of living on a planet alongside over 8 billion other humans). So many issues that we have to deal with are not straightforward – instead of seeing things in black and white, we become aware of all those murky shades of grey in-between – we realise that there are

often multiple valid ways of looking at a situation and it can be hard to arbitrate between them. Truths can be paradoxical. And the practical business of organising society and running the world – it's just very complex – there are so many competing goods and valid interests to be balanced. It seems to me that the troubling wave of populism that we're currently seeing around the world is, in part, rooted in an inability to face this great complexity and grapple with it honestly. Populist appeals to 'common sense' pretend that the answers are simple (but their so-called answers often revolve around flat-out denial of reality, misinformation, dehumanising, scapegoating and blame). You could also think of this aspect of 'adulthood' as having the courage to face the fact that we live in an imperfect world – that there is a 'tragic gap', in the words of Parker J. Palmer – or as the philosopher Susan Neiman puts it: 'courage is required to live with the rift that will run through our lives, however good they may be: ideals of reason tell us how the world should be; experience tells us that it rarely is. Growing up requires confronting the gap between the two – without giving up on either one.'

One final aspect of growing up I want to mention is around the acceptance of life's limits. Perhaps this also connects with making commitments, rather than trying to keep all your options open; having a life that is narrow and deep rather than broad and shallow; putting down roots rather than endlessly drifting. Psychologist Klaus Rothermund is quoted in Sarner's book, saying 'It's different when you're young, when you can still try out everything. You can do things just because you want to do them, because you can do the important things later. But when you're old, doing the unimportant things first means you might never face the important things.' And Sarner reflects further: 'This honing process, this sieving and sifting of what matters most – this is a key grow-up of old-old-age – although perhaps it has roots much earlier in life. It rests on another grow-up: understanding the fact that your life will come to an end.'

Through the book 'When I Grow Up', Moya Sarner interviews people throughout life's ages and stages, getting older as she gets towards the end, and in the final chapter she interviews a 90-year-old woman who goes by the nickname of Pog. Pog says: 'I truly do not consider that

I have grown up. And I'm 90. But one thing that really pleases me, to the extent of being a bit smug about it, is the really childish pleasures. You know, where you sort of clap your hands and say, "Oh! Look at that!" And somehow I've still got that, and I love it. It can be completely trivial things.'

Pog's excellent example brings us back to the paradox: one of the childish things we probably need to put away is this fixation on being entirely grown-up. Yes, it is important to grow up. To keep growing up throughout our lives. To develop in practical wisdom, to embrace responsibility, to wrestle with complexity, to accept life's limits, and all the other aspects of growing up that we haven't even mentioned today. But as C.S Lewis hinted: there is something to be said for retaining a bit of childishness too. Being free-spirited, idealistic, maybe even unrealistic, dreaming big, in touch with simple joys. We don't have to put away these 'childish things'. Sarner endorses this view, she says: 'whatever life stage you find yourself in, the question of being more or less grown up, of being able to continue growing up or stalling somewhere along the road, has something important to do with how we relate to the younger versions of ourselves that we hold inside us – the concentric circles in our tree trunk. Whether we can hold on to them, find a way to live with them and look after them, to keep them alive in us, so that they can keep us alive.'

And I want to offer just one last excerpt from the conclusion of Moya Sarner's book to close: 'I started writing this book because I wanted to know what it meant to be an adult and to find out why I wasn't one yet... Now that I can hear that I was asking the wrong question – or rather, that question has changed. Now the question has become not why haven't I finished growing up, but how can I keep growing up, throughout my life? I wanted to find a definition of what an adult is... Now I understand that this definition will be different for every individual, and it will change from moment to moment for each of us, depending on the grow-up we are facing. I do now know, through this writing, through my analysis, through my patients, through speaking to so many fascinating people, that the work of growing up never stops – not if you're lucky. Not until the very end.' Amen.

Our Harvest Table

On 13 October we held our annual harvest service on the theme of 'Our Daily Bread' and gathered this splendid array of loaves, fruit, and veg for our central table. Our chalice was lit with these words from Katie Gelfand: 'We light our chalice as a symbol of gratitude as we celebrate the abundance of our lives together. In this sanctuary we harvest bushels of strength for one another, and offer our crop with the hands of compassion and generosity. In the authentic and gentle manner of our connections, we cultivate a simple sweetness to brighten our spirits. May we be grateful for the ways we nourish and uplift each other, for it is the sharing of this hallowed time together that sustains us.'



Contact Kensington Unitarians

The best way to get in touch with us is by email:

Minister: Rev. Dr. Jane Blackall
jane@kensington-unitarians.org.uk

Admin Team (for bookings)
office@kensington-unitarians.org.uk

Chairperson: Liz Tuckwell
chair@kensington-unitarians.org.uk

Treasurer: Patricia Brewerton
treasurer@kensington-unitarians.org.uk

Warden: Ramona Cristea
warden@kensington-unitarians.org.uk

kensington-unitarians.org.uk