

Stockton Unitarians



“Spring” post-box top in Yarm High Street—photo by Alan Farrell

Church News
March/April 2026



Church services held in January and February 2026

New Year's Service Reflections Sunday 18th January 2026

A group of six, met on Zoom for a New Year's service, "Looking Forward" with Margaret Robinson leading the service. We lit the chalice "As a beacon of hope, a sign of our quest for truth and meaning. In celebration of the life we live together" words by Chrisine Robinson. Margaret R read "New Year's Day" by Kathleen McTigue followed by a prayer "God of Love"

Hazel read a "Story for the young at heart" about an old lady who each New Year's Eve wrote what she would like to see happen in the coming year.

Jane Tomlin read Tony McNealy's "Ten Commandments", emphasizing the importance of religious community. Margaret Kirk reflected on the challenges of the current world situation, while David shared a positive experience about healthcare workers during his recent cancer treatment. Hazel mentioned an upcoming Holocaust memorial event in their village.

Jane Tomlin shared a prayer meditation from the URC handbook, expressing gratitude and grace, while acknowledging the world's troubles. She advised limiting radio and television news consumption and suggested connecting with others through personal interactions. Margaret Robinson read a poem "In Praise of Winter" by Greta W Crosby, highlighting its beauty and challenges.

Margaret Kirk read an excerpt from John Midgley's book about New Year's Eve, discussing its religious significance and historical customs, including the belief in evil spirits and the use of superstitions to ward them off. Highlighting the importance of community and support for vulnerable individuals during this time, emphasizing the role of religion and shared experiences in combating loneliness and negative emotions. David read an excerpt from Franklin D Roosevelt's address to the American Congress on January 6, 1941,

Four Freedoms Day. Freedom **of speech and expression**, freedom of **every person to worship God in his own way**, freedom **from want** (economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants - everywhere in the world) and freedom **from fear** (a world-wide reduction in armaments, (so that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbour anywhere in the world).

Highlighting the need for global cooperation and harmony,

The service ended with a responsive prayer and the benediction said together "We go out to the adventure of living. With high hopes, and in good heart".

Due to technical musical problems we did not sing any hymns, Margaret reading the first verse of each instead.

On Sunday 25th January Rev Paul Walker led the service on Robert Burns' poetry, Burns night is celebrated on 25th January each year, usually with a feast of haggis, neeps and tatties and a dram of whiskey, with poetry recitals and toasts (Paul was having their meal with Iron Brew)

Burns' poems explore themes of nature, love, mortality, and the human condition. Paul discussed the life and works of Robert (Rabbie) Burns, reading (both in Burns' original dialect and then in English) three of his poems, including "A Red, Red Rose," "O my Luve's like a red, red rose" emphasizing the enduring nature of love despite life's challenges. Paul also highlighted Burns' personal struggles and how they influenced his writing, while noting the importance of his contributions to Scottish literature.



He then read and explained Burns' poem "To a Mouse," "Wee, sleek-it, cow'rin, tim'rous beastie" emphasizing its themes of empathy and the futility of human plans, and highlighted Burns' background as a tenant farmer and ploughman.

Paul told of Burns' ability to convey deep emotions and social commentary through simple language. He also shared his thoughts on Burns' life, poverty, and how his works continue to resonate with people today.

The third Burns' poem was 'A prayer on the prospect of death' "O Thou unknown, Almighty Cause of all my hope and fear!" In these verses, Burns acknowledges that he did not always stick to the path of righteousness and laments that he may meet his maker quite soon.

Robert Burns was born in January 25th 1759 in Alloway, Ayrshire, Scotland, the eldest son of seven children in a family of tenant farmers. Despite their modest means his parents emphasized education and Burns developed a love of poetry and literature at a young age. His upbringing in a rural setting greatly influenced his writing. He died in 1796.

We had a congregation of seven in the chapel and two people joined us on Zoom. We sang "People, sing your country's anthem", "Wake, now, my senses, and hear the earth call", "Spirit of earth, root, stone and tree" and "Break not the circle of enabling love".

On Sunday 1st February 2026 Rev Margaret Kirk led the service on the theme of "Looking at the Stars".

Margaret shared a passage from "The Book of Comfort" by an author (Matt Haigh) who experienced severe depression,



emphasising the persistence of hope, even in difficult times

Margaret read Reverend David Usher's reflections describing his experience participating in a clergy-led (and many faith leaders) protest in Minneapolis against ICE violence and deportations, in January 2026. He described attending a large gathering at Westminster Presbyterian Church, followed by an airport protest where about 100 clergy were arrested, and participating in a march attended by 50,000 people. David expressed deep admiration for the Unitarian Universalist community in Minneapolis, who he observed were demonstrating extraordinary resilience and spiritual grounding in their activism against the federal government's policies.

David shared reflections on witnessing both the worst and best of humanity during his trip to Minneapolis, emphasizing the importance of courage, decency and democratic principles. He was hosted, fed and transported by many kind Americans.

Margaret chose her theme of "Looking at the Stars" because of her childhood experiences with her father's interest in astronomy and the significance of stars as symbols of hope and guidance.

We had a congregation of six in the chapel with three people joining us on Zoom. We sang "Let us renew our covenant", "God who fills the universe" (tune "Francis David" written by him, a Transylvania Unitarian pioneer) "Our world is one world" and "Now we sing to praise love's blessing"

Sunday 8th February 2026 was a bring and Share service on the theme of "Spring"

Margaret Robinson led the service and members of the congregation, both in the chapel and on Zoom shared readings. Jane Tomlin shared William Wordsworth's sister's recollections of



spring walks in the Lake District 224 years ago, including observations of daffodils and other flowers. Hazel brought some snowdrops from her garden and shared a meditation by a new Unitarian minister Tina Gandhi from the Chowbent Chapel. Jane A read two poems, one by Vivian Wade about spring cleaning and another by e e cummings about the nature of spring, Margaret Whitham read a piece about Spring on the farm by Matt Baker. Jean read the poem Spring by Les Parsons (who was Poet Laureate of Radio Cleveland). Margaret R's readings were Spring People, Spring by Christina Rossetti and Spring Perpetual by Stickland Gillian. We had a prayer by Jen Atkinson and an Alternative Lord's Prayer by Lesley McKeown.

T S Eliot was a spring person, but said April was the cruellest month. But Keats was an autumn lover, he championed the "season of mists and mellow fruitfulness", David said although he liked the spring he was a winter person and mentioned that the gravitational pull of the planet Mars is affecting the Earth's climate.

We sang "Spirit of Earth, root, stone and tree", "Here we have gathered" and "Hope is born in springtime" The service ended with Dawn Buckle's closing words "As we leave this service may the holy music linger in our ears. May the poetry of the spoken words stay in our minds, May our spirits remain uplifted. May our lives be blest."

Sunday 15th February 2026 Christine Walker led the service on the theme of Valentine's Day.

Christine spoke about the different types of love, including romantic, friendship, familial, and altruistic love. She explored the history and significance of Saint Valentine, discussing his life as a 3rd century Roman cleric, his martyrdom, and his association with both romantic love and beekeeping. The importance of bees and their role in building community, emphasiz-



ing kindness, gentleness, and love in their actions. She highlighted Valentine's commitment to love in all its forms, his bravery, and his role in early Christian conversions. Valentine married couples and gave them a heart-shaped document with their two names on it.

Christine looked at the global celebration of Valentine's Day, with estimates of 115 billion spent internationally and 1.5 billion in the UK, primarily on chocolates, flowers, and cards. She also explored cultural variations in celebrating the day in different countries and read a poem by Edgar Allan Poe that contained a hidden message.

Paul gave us prayers based on Greek concepts of love, and Christine read a poem about bees written by artificial intelligence.

We had a **congregation** of seven in the chapel and three on Zoom. We sang "Love knocks and waits for us to hear", "May I use my hands with care", "Loving Spirit" and "Love will guide us".



Valentine died on February 14th.

Free training opportunities provided by the Charity Commission:

[Safeguarding in a Faith Context: Charity Commission Expectations - Webinar](#)

[Taking Care of your Funds for Faith Charities](#)

[Charity Commission's Vetting Expectations & an Introduction to the Disclosure and Barring Service](#)

Uni-sing! A Zoom hymn singing group, with break-out groups for a chat in the middle. For more information email Louise Rogers [louise.rogers256@gmail](mailto:louise.rogers256@gmail.com) Or see [facebook.co/groups/687366168770017](https://www.facebook.com/groups/687366168770017) **Sessions: Saturdays 3.00pm (open 2.30pm) 7th and 21st March, 4th April 2026**

Marking Holocaust Memorial Day 2026

Hazel Warhurst

Leti Hawthorn lives in Ingleby Arncliffe. She is an interfaith minister and celebrant, healthcare chaplain, yoga and exercise teacher and gives end-of-life support.

She offered to hold a space in our Village Hall for Reflection and global peace for any residents and friends who wished to join her on Holocaust Memorial Day 2026.

The weather could hardly have been any wetter. Despite repairs to the roof of the Village Hall, a Grade 2 listed building, rain had found its way in so there were puddles to mop up before we began.

The small number of us who braved the rain sat in a circle around a table with quiet music playing. Leti welcomed us, introduced herself and gave a background to the Day. Thoughts were shared and there was an opportunity for everyone to pour water into a communal bowl—silently-or using the words “My tears are for”

A visitor – Faiza Kiran - whom Leti had met at the Hartlepool Mosque - read her poem, written especially for that day.

I was glad to have had the opportunity to be present, and later to place a Holocaust Memorial candle in the window at 8pm.



Photo by Leti Hawthorn

Here is Faiza’s poem.

What is the Value of Human Life?

by Faiza Kiran for Holocaust Memorial Day 2026

I opened the pages of our past
and found the same handprint everywhere:

 fingers curled,
 gripping power
as if the earth were the throat
of a rich, defenceless orphan.

From warlords draped in iron,
to Vikings riding fire,

from tribal crowns of bone and blood
to modern men in polished rooms,
There was only one ambition:

'Our good and their doom'.

The actors change

The weapons change

The costumes change, But the greed does not.

We have taken.

We have burned.

We have erased entire mornings
before they ever learned to rise.

We have silenced innocent souls
before they ever learned to smile.

We have stifled innocent hope
before it ever dared to shine.

Homes collapsed into smoke,
cradles echoing with lullabies,
infant dreams buried before they could learn the shape of hope.

Sometimes we named it destiny.

Sometimes we named it faith.

Sometimes we called it civilisation.

Sometimes, national interest.

But everyone knew what it was:
sometimes gold, glittering in the sun
Sometimes dark, thick oil,
sometimes gas, minerals, land.

Our history rings with clashing swords,
cannon shells, missiles, atom bombs, gunfire.
The earth was stripped bare by never-ending human desire,
and so were the innocent people standing on it.

Every page of this painful history
is littered with blood and cruelty.
And scrolling the last page,

a sigh ends the story,
Of a human past choked with wars,
with greed,
with misery.

That...
We learned how to weigh riches,
how to count borders,
how to price the world.
We learned how to value gold,
oil, gas, minerals.
We learned how to call cruelty strength,
slitting throats, creating strife,
but we never learned, not once,
how to value
human life

Unitarian Facilitators Network

Looking to develop your facilitation skills or launch engagement groups in your community? The new Unitarian Facilitators Network started in autumn 2025 with monthly Zoom sessions designed for both experienced facilitators and newcomers. Jane Blackall and Lizzie Kingston Harrison will host these gatherings for peer support, skill development, and collective problem-solving. Whether you're running groups now or hoping to start, this network aims to build facilitation expertise across the movement. **Monthly meetings: Third Monday, 7:30pm**

Contact: Email Jane (jane@kensingtonunitarians.org.uk) for joining details.

Stockton Unitarians Church Council next meet
on Sunday 19th April 2026 at 4.30pm
(prior to 6.00pm service)

Holocaust Memorial Day Event, 26 January 2026

We were honoured to be invited to the Holocaust Memorial Day event at the Banqueting Hall at Newcastle Civic Centre on Monday 26 January 2026. Well attended by faith groups and children from schools across Newcastle, it was hosted by Smajo Beso OBE, a survivor of the Bosnian genocide (read more about him here: <https://tinyurl.com/BosnianGeordie>).

We began with a very moving musical performance from the massed choirs of Newcastle Schools, including Dame Allan's Junior School, Gosforth East Middle School, St. John's Primary School and Newcastle School for Boys, co-ordinated by Newcastle Music Service. There could hardly be a better way to emphasise the fact that HMD in the 21st century is now as much, if not more, about educating the young as it is of remembering and honouring the sacrifices and suffering of the survivors.

Candle lightings by representatives of the survivors of the Holocaust, Darfur, Cambodia, Rwanda and Bosnians genocides followed, with prayers and thoughts shared by the (strikingly confident and articulate) young people of Newcastle. Perhaps one of the most moving parts of the event was the introduction to it by Dr. Martin Stern MBE, a Holocaust survivor, whose account of how Nazi Germany exploited him as a child to identify other Jewish people in his neighbourhood so that they could be rounded up and killed was a harrowing but very necessary listen.

As the event closed with another performance by the school choirs, I also found myself thinking of one of Newcastle upon Tyne Unitarians' greatest spiritual leaders, Rev. Herbert Barnes, our minister from 1919-1951 and a vigorous opponent of antisemitism during the 1930s who is mentioned in the Jewish Golden Book (more about him here: <https://tinyurl.com/RevHerbertBarnes>). His sharp analysis of the perniciousness of anti-Semitic propaganda, and forthright demand for us to reject racism in all its forms can be seen in full online here: <https://tinyurl.com/NUTUHMD2026>

I mention this because the presenter's point was that the world order that has persisted since the end of WWII is going away fast, and our nation, along with others including fellow European nations, will mostly likely need to think about how best to work together to defend ourselves and our values. How we do this whilst also protecting the vulnerable amongst us and seeing the neighbour in the stranger is going to be a mighty challenge for all among us, whatever our faiths and spirituality. The temptation to descend into chauvinism, racism, and nationalism is ever-present. Only through the commitment and unity shown during this event can we hope to maintain a world in which hope and peace prevail. To quote Rev. Barnes: **"I have the hope that some day humanity will gain sufficient freedom from our prejudices as to live a free and happy life, in joyous co-operation with our fellows everywhere"**.

Louise Reeve



*Congratulations
to those Celebrating their
Birthday in*

March

Erik Casidius Robinson

April

Arthur Tyr Robinson

Carys Thompson

*Congratulations to
Hazel and David Warhurst on their
57th Wedding Anniversary*

**Coffee Morning at Stockton Unitarians is on the
second Saturday of the month from 10.00am till
11.30am**

Come and enjoy a cup of tea or coffee with biscuits,
good conversation with a friendly welcoming group.

Saturday 14th March 2026

Saturday 11th April 2026

Saturday 9th May 2026



**Deadline for the next edition of Church News is the
Wednesday 22nd April 2026**

Please send your contributions for the May/June 2026
edition to the Editor: Margaret Robinson

margaretrobinson81@gmail.com

ANNUAL MEETINGS

Date For Your Diary - GA 2026, 27-29 March

Friday, 27th March 2026 (Day1 from Plenary I at 2.00pm) to Sunday 29th March 2026 (Day3 – finishing after lunch, in the usual way).

The Venue is The Hayes Conference Centre, Hayes Lane, Swanwick, Alfreton, Derbyshire, DE55 1AU.

<https://www.cct.org.uk/the-hayes/the-hayes-conference-centre>

Paul Waker is Stockton Unitarians delegate, Hazel Warhurst Newcastle delegate, and Margaret Robinson is NUA delegate.

Our Knit 'n' Natter Group meet on alternative Tuesdays from 11.00am to 1.00pm. If you enjoy knitting, crocheting , sewing or just chatting, come along bring your lunch and enjoy a couple of hours in good friendly company with a cup of tea. **Dates: 10th and 24th March, 7th and 21st April, 5th and 19th May**



CHURCH DIRECTORY

Address: Stockton Unitarian Centre, Vane Street, Stockton-on-Tees, TS18 1RF

Church website: <http://stocktonunitarians.co.uk>

Church facebook: Unitarians in and around Stockton-on-Tees

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Worship Committee Co-Ordinator: Margaret Whitham 01429 298641

Unitarian Facilitators Network

The Unitarian Facilitators Network is one of many new initiatives recently looking to support our movement to survive and thrive, including 'Sea and Sky' for coastal congregations, 'Heart of the City' for urban congregations, the Administrators Network, District Connections, Safeguarding and many more. This gathering is described by the convenor, Rev Dr Jane Blackall at Kensington Unitarians, as:

"A monthly gathering for all those who currently facilitate engagement groups within our movement and those who aspire to do so. We hope to encourage new facilitators, develop your facilitation skills, and help you plan and launch your own programmes. Our intention is that this will also be a space where more experienced facilitators will share their wisdom and reflect on best practice. Over the months we will develop a network for peer support and the collective workshopping of ideas to suit varied contexts."

I attended in November; whilst I'm not myself looking to start an engagement group in the near future, it's a skill I'd like to know more about to support future community work in Newcastle. We began with a chalice lighting and words, then discussed some of the basic characteristics of engagement groups such as behavioural covenants, opening check-ins, learning and sharing, checking-out and closing. We discussed some potentially tricky issues, such as balancing the need to not respond to what people say in their check-ins (debate is not the point of them), with ensuring people feel heard, and how to handle unacceptable behaviour.

As a thought experiment, we were asked to imagine an engagement group that we might like to be a part of, for example:

- What would be ideal in terms of focus activity or subject matter, frequency, number and length of sessions?
- Would it be in-person or online?
- What sort of group would meet a need in you and realistically fit in with...
- Your life?
- The life of your congregation?
- The life of the wider community?

Perhaps that's an exercise we could all consider! Many thanks to Rev Dr Jane Blackall and all involved for a fascinating session.

Louise Reeve

Editor Stockton: Can we set a date to re-start our Engagement Group?

“Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

Howard Thurman

philosopher, theologian, educator, and civil rights leader.



GA Executive Committee (L-R: Joe Calvert, Sarah Benfield, John Bates, Arek Malecki, Zac Baker, Stephanie Bisby, Liz Slade)

