

Stockton Unitarians



Swans and cygnets on the river Tees at Yarm photograph by Alan Farrell

Church News
July/August 2026



Services held in April, May and June 2026

On Sunday 26th April Margaret Robinson and Jean Watson led a service for Climate Justice Sunday

They discussed the concept of extending kinship to the natural world, drawing on examples from Indigenous cultures and the work of Robin Wall Kimmerer. Margaret explored how different languages and worldviews treat nature, highlighting the potential for granting personhood to natural entities and the legal implications of such recognition. The service focused on climate justice, with references to the Unitarians for Climate Justice group and their resources for worship services and workshops.



The congregation sang hymns including "Let us give thanks", "Spirit of Earth, Root, Stone and Tree", "We celebrate the web of life" and "Wide Green World," and participated in a ritual where members of the congregation placed objects, representing natural elements, on a world map, while reading about environmental rights,

Jane read a story about bears, salmon, and a river reaching an agreement, followed by the seven rights of Mother Earth. Participants read aloud the seven rights, which included maintaining life systems, preserving biodiversity, protecting water and air quality, and ensuring proper functioning of all Earth's components.

Margaret shared thoughts about climate change and its impact on refugees, citing statistics from the UN Refugee Agency. She discussed how climate-related events have displaced millions of people annually, with examples from Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Mozambique, and Bangladesh. Highlighting that many countries most affected by climate change are already hosting large numbers of refugees and internally displaced people, with conflicts often arising over control of resources

like land, water, and fossil fuels.

The service focused on environmental concerns and personal responses to climate change. Margaret shared insights on coping with feelings of despair about climate change through gratitude, self-compassion, connecting with others, and taking local action. The service included reflections on nature's nurturing qualities and the importance of honouring both human and natural communities.

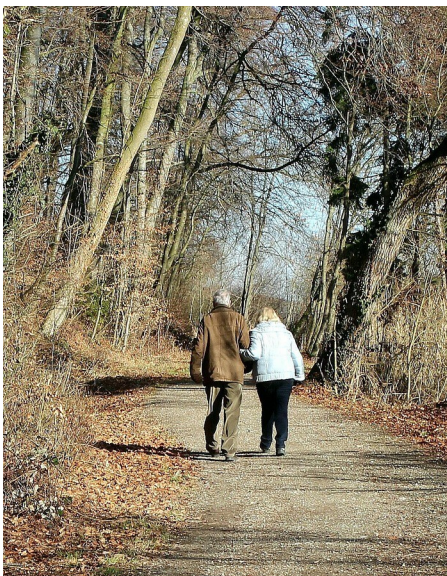
The service ended with a prayer for compassion and wisdom, emphasizing the importance of loving and caring for the earth and each other.

We had a congregation of seven and one person joined on Zoom.

No service was held on Sunday 3rd May 2026, as it was a Bank holiday and many people were away enjoying time with family and friends.

On Sunday 10th May 2026 we welcomed Brigitte and Tom McCready from Doncaster, when Brigitte led the service on the theme of **“Reflection on Living in Harmony”**

She discussed the importance of creating a welcoming environment, particularly for those seeking help through "renewing the bond" and "living in harmony." Brigitte opened the service with a reflection on circles, drawing from the words of Native American leader Black Elk,



emphasizing the interconnectedness of life and the world.

Brigitte focused on discussing themes from Native American traditions, paganism, neo-paganism, and Celtic Christianity. She began by having the group sing hymn number 21 from the Purple Book, followed by a discussion about the benefits of group singing, comparing it to karaoke. She then shared her thoughts on connecting with Celtic goddess traditions, though she clarified she doesn't identify as either pagan or Christian.

Brigitte shared a personal anecdote about encountering a religious activist in her hometown and expressed empathy for the person's dedication despite disagreeing with their approach. She then presented a blessing invocation inspired by the Dostoevsky ceremony, which involves addressing different directions - east, south, west, and north - to offer blessings for various qualities like wisdom, strength, compassion, and fortitude. The invocation included blessings for beginnings, passion, laughter, and perseverance, invoking the names of teachers, guardians, lovers, and heroes from each direction.

She also offered prayers for delight in life, diversity, and unity and ended with blessings for the four directions and the four elements (earth, air, fire, and water). She reflected on how these elements teach lessons about living in balance and sharing the world, drawing parallels between ancient spiritual teachings and modern beliefs. Brigitte also touched on her personal views about heaven, expressing uncertainty about its existence, while finding comfort in Native American traditions that include heaven and earth as sacred concepts without mentioning hell.

Brigitte led a modified Lord's Prayer addressing "Our Mother, whose body is the earth." She explained the Beltane festival, which occurs around May 1st, discussing its origins and variations in different cultures. She shared personal connections to the festival, mentioning her middle name Val Durga and its ties to Saint Valburga and ancient goddess

traditions.

Brigitte discussed the revival of the Walpurgis Night, a celebration where women reconnect with their female heritage and historical wisdom. She explained how wise women, originally known as witches, were known for their knowledge of nature and childbirth practices. She emphasized how these traditions help combat alienation and promote mental health, noting that one doesn't need to be a pagan or witch to benefit from these connections to historical practices.

The service focused on themes of harmony, connection to nature, and circular patterns in life, incorporating elements from Celtic Christianity, Native American traditions, and paganism. Participants shared stones as expressions of joys, concerns, or gratitude, with several people expressing thanks for kindness received and appreciation for the NHS. The service concluded with a closing hymn and a prayer for awakening and renewed purpose. .

We had a congregation of nine and one person joined on Zoom. We sang “Come and find a quiet centre”, “Lady of the seasons laughter”, “The best things” and “Others Call it God”.

On Sunday 17th May 2026

Rev Paul Walker led our worship. The service began with Paul lighting the chalice and asking the congregation to reflect on why they had come to church that day, introducing his theme about how humans turn experiences into stories.



Paul spoke about the power of stories in human understanding and interpretation. He began by telling the familiar story of the Three Little

Pigs building houses of different materials to protect from the Big Bad Wolf, illustrating how people remember stories regardless of time,

Then he discussed how detective stories follow familiar formulaic patterns where someone does something wrong, often involving murder, that satisfy our need for narrative structure. He explained that humans naturally create and interpret stories to make sense of the world, using his own religious journey as an example of how different faiths tell competing but truth-containing narratives about the same events.

He explained that different religions and cultures tell conflicting stories about historical events like World War II, with each side believing their narrative contains the truth. Paul illustrated this point by describing how Germans, French, Russians, and Americans each have distinct perspectives on World War II that reflect their unique experiences and national narratives.

Paul applied this concept to current geopolitical conflicts, particularly the Ukraine-Russia situation, explaining how both sides believe their version of events is true. He referenced research by Will Stoll about how the human brain processes stories rather than facts, and how people tend to dismiss opposing narratives while embracing those that align with their group identity. How stories shape group perceptions and divide people into heroes and villains. He questioned whether the Unitarian Church has a compelling narrative that members can embrace.

Paul concluded with a prayer for peace, as well as for patience and understanding in understanding personal stories within the larger story of the world.

We had a congregation of four and two people joined on Zoom. We sang “Thy Kingdom come”, Dear weaver of our lives’ design”, There is a place I call my own” and “Joy of Living”.

On Sunday 24th May 2026 Rev

Margaret Kirk led the service on the theme of **Belonging**, with opening words emphasizing the importance of listening, speaking thoughtfully, and finding common ground. Followed by a prayer focused on caring for others and overcoming indifference. Jean

read the story "Charlie's Coat," by Margaret Silf, which taught about acceptance, friendship, and the importance of caring for others.



Margaret read a passage from poet Lemn Sissay's introduction to "Gold from the Stone" about his difficult childhood and search for identity, then discussed the importance of native languages in maintaining cultural identity and sense of belonging, referencing the decline of languages worldwide, highlighting the historical suppression of Welsh and other native languages. She shared her recent observations of the Cornish language revival in Cornwall, noting the growing interest in preserving cultural heritage and family connections. The discussion included a reference to a folk song about shepherds in North Yorkshire using an old Celtic language to count sheep,

Margaret also spoke of the cultural significance of learning minority languages, connecting it to identity and belonging, particularly for immigrants and exiled communities. She reflected on the concept of "somewhere people" versus "anywhere people," as described by journalist David Goodheart, and considered how different people find their strongest sense of attachment and belonging.

Margaret then shared a passage from a poetry collection by Lemn Sissay, discussing his challenging childhood and search for his biological family. She explained how Sissay's experiences of racism and institutional neglect shaped his poetry, despite the difficult

circumstances. She noted that Sissay eventually found his mother and continued to pursue his poetic career.

The discussion concluded with a reading of a poem by Lemn Sissay titled "Listening Post," which explored themes of trauma, healing, and resilience.

We sang "Speaking truth in love", "The flame of truth is kindled", "There is a place I call my own" and "When our heart is in a holy place". We had a congregation of five plus three people joined us on Zoom.

On Sunday 31st May 2026 we welcomed Rev Robert Foreman who led the service on the theme "**Unitarianism: A Faith for the Future,**" which explored how Unitarianism offers a progressive, questioning approach to spirituality that embraces both reason and compassion. He discussed how Unitarianism offers a welcoming space for people questioning traditional religion, emphasizing its values of intellectual credibility, compassion, and freedom from dogma.

Rob shared the parable of the Good Samaritan from Luke's gospel, explaining how it illustrates the importance of compassion over division and labels. He connected the story to his family's history with Nazareth Unitarian Chapel, where his ancestor Eli Whitehead gifted a



stained glass window featuring the Good Samaritan. Rob emphasized that true faith should focus on recognizing neighbours rather than maintaining boundaries, and concluded with a prayer inspired by Teresa of Avila's teachings about the inner life as a journey through various rooms toward truth and love.

Rob discussed the Unitarian spirit of reflection and humility in approaching different religious expressions. He reflected on how faith evolves over time, noting examples from his family's Catholic and Unitarian heritage, emphasizing that both traditions grappled with fundamental human questions about purpose, morality, and meaning. Rob concluded that despite modern perceptions of religion as outdated, the underlying human need for faith and meaning persists in the face of technological and social changes.

Unitarianism is a faith that embraces freedom and diversity, highlighting the story of Gertrude von Petzold, the first woman fully trained as a Unitarian Minister. Emphasizing Unitarianism's progressive nature and ability to hold both reason and mystery. He argued that Unitarianism offers a faith for the future by prioritizing openness, humility, and compassion over rigid dogma, making it essential in an age of polarization.

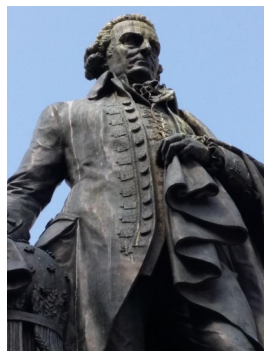
The service concluded with a prayer for courage to question, humility to learn, and compassion to see others as fellow travellers on life's journey

We sang "Come and find a quiet centre", "God speaks to us", "Others call it God" and "Come down O love Divine".

We had a congregation of seven with one person joining us via Zoom.

On Sunday 7th June 2026 Barry Thomas led the service on **"Is it OK to be selfish?"**

Barry delivered a sermon about selfishness and whether it's acceptable, drawing on biblical passages, economic theories and various philosophical perspectives on self-interest versus altruism. Reflecting on whether it is acceptable to be selfish. He explored various perspectives



including natural human tendencies, cultural and philosophical ideas from Enlightenment thinkers like Adam Smith, and religious concepts emphasizing inward journeys. Barry concluded by referencing Jesus's teaching about prioritizing others, suggesting that while self-interest is natural, balancing it with concern for others is essential for a meaningful life.

Barry's readings were "Paul's letter to James 2;13-18" and "Comment on Adam Smith 'The Wealth of Nations'"

We sang the Lord's Prayer and hymns "Immortal, Invisible", "The Life that Maketh All Things New" "We believe in human kindness" and "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee" We had a congregation of seven and two people joined us via Zoom.

On Sunday 14th June Rev Victor Ball led the service on **Love**, incorporating readings from Isaiah, Luke, and 1 Corinthians, as well as hymns and a musical interlude.



Victor led a prayer focused on peace, reflecting on loving fellowship and compassion towards all living beings. He specifically prayed for peace in regions affected by conflict, including Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Ukraine, and Russia, and asked for strength for peacemakers and aid workers.

Victor discussed the works of Hafez, the pen-name of the 14th century Persian poet and Sufi mystic Mohammad Hafez Shirazi (1325–1390).

His work was first translated into English in 1771 and influenced writers such as the German freemason Goethe, the Irish poet and occultist W.B. Yeats, and the American Transcendentalists Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Hafez was also a favourite of the fifth president of Iran, the reformist Mohammed Khatami who served

between 1997-2005.

Born in 1943, Mohammed Khatami studied philosophy before embarking on a political career within the Islamic Republic formed after the revolution in 1979.

Press freedom, civil society, women's rights, religious tolerance, dialogue and political development were at the heart of Khatami's manifesto. Unfortunately, he faced insurmountable pressure from orthodox seminarians over the changes he proposed and was continuously over-ruled by the Guardian Council.

Nevertheless, during his presidency, Iran's foreign policy began to move from confrontation to conciliation as Khatami sought to replace 'clashes between civilisations' with 'dialogue among civilisations'.

The (then) Iranian president Mohammad Khatami was to end a state visit to Germany in 2000 with a call for a new era of dialogue between eastern and western culture. During the visit, he'd unveiled a memorial to two of the world's greatest literary figures – the fourteenth-century Persian poet, Hafez, and the German writer, Goethe – in Weimar, Goethe's adopted home town.

The memorial consists of two chairs carved in stone and facing each other, as if the two poets are engaged in conversation. Perhaps, if we listen carefully, we shall hear them say:

The subject tonight is Love
And for tomorrow night as well,
As a matter of fact
I know of no better topic
For us to discuss

Summer Solstice celebration at Flowergate Chapel, Whitby

On Sunday 21st June friends from as far afield as Newcastle, Stockton, Wakefield and Hull joined local people in the Chapel for a special ceremony to mark mid-summer and the longest day of the year. We were welcomed by Claire Lee who had arranged the event.

The celebration began with the Casting of the Sacred Circle and calling the directions, East, South, West and North, and then invoking the Goddess of Midsummer. The focus of the service

was on trees and participation was invited from everyone present. We shared our various encounters with trees and learned a chant. Then we were invited to take a meditative walk through the Chapel Garden and be refreshed with a drink of orange juice – the colour of the Midsummer sunset. Whitby Community Choir treated us to two original songs about the Oak Tree and the Apple Tree, which they had composed via Zoom during the Covid



Lockdown. Following their singing we all shared in a delicious Strawberry Communion. The Choir Leader, Rebecca Denniff, had written a poem especially for the occasion and it was read to us by David Owen. The ceremony ended with a closing blessing and opening the Sacred Circle to allow bidding farewell and giving thanks to the Goddess.

Stockton visitors - Margaret Kirk, Jean Watson, Hazel, David and Neill Warhurst, with Andrew Watson, his daughter and a friend, then enjoyed a walk along the harbour in the June sunshine before making our way to the Park and Ride bus so we could collect our cars and drive home.

Hazel Warhurst



Keukenhof Gardens - The Netherlands

Keukenhof lies near the town of Lisse, about 25 miles south of Amsterdam. The park covers about 32 Hectares in total. The gardens were redesigned in 1857 in the English Landscape style by the renowned landscape architects Jan David Zocher and his son Louis Paul Zocher. In 1949 a group of 20 leading flower



bulb growers and exporters came up with the plan to exhibit spring-flowering bulbs there, and it has been such a success that it is known as a spring park.

The park opened its gates to the public in 1950 and had 236,000 visitors in the first year alone.

It is now a world-wide attraction although it is only open for a very limited period each year. While admiring tulips at the Harrogate Spring Flower Show last year Sarah and I decided we ought to have a trip to see them growing in Holland. As Sarah



was taking early retirement from Business Durham at the end of March 2026 David and I suggested celebrating with a Mini-trip to Holland in April. We used the DFDS overnight ferry from the Port of Tyne, being a very convenient crossing for those of us living in the North-East. After a comfortable night's sleep you arrive refreshed and ready to make the most of your

visit. Sarah took care of all the arrangements, booking a cabin for the Ferry crossing, a hotel for two nights, and drove us around in her car.

We spent the first afternoon exploring the Space Expo site near Noordwijk on our way to the hotel. It is very much a "hands on" Museum designed to engage all ages. The exhibition was right up to date with details of space flight Artemis 11.

We visited Keukenhof Gardens the following morning along with hundreds of other visitors. The gardens are beautifully laid out with banks of colour in bed after bed of Spring flowers, which were quite breathtaking.



Walking to the entrance from the car parks filled with cars, Campervans and coaches, we were expecting to find refreshment and other facilities to be very crowded, but that was not the case.

We were very lucky to visit on a day when there was perfect weather – Plenty of Spring sunshine and clear blue skies showing off the beauty of the many trees and flowers.



There were many spectacular displays of flowers in the Gardens even though Holland is probably best known for its Tulips.



We bought tickets for an afternoon ride on one of the "Whisper" boats – so called because they use electricity as they silently transport visitors along the canal system surrounding the park to view the bulb fields. Here is where the bulbs are cultivated ready to be sold world-wide for autumn planting.

Their colours are so strong and vibrant everywhere in this area that when you are driving around they almost seem unreal.



Although these days everyone seems to associate Tulip growing with The Netherlands they actually originated in Persia and Ottoman Empire (modern-day Turkey).

Long before reaching Europe, wild tulips were cultivated in Persia and were a major symbol of wealth, power, and paradise, inspiring poetry and art.

The name "tulip" comes from the Turkish word for turban, *tulbend*, because the shape of the flower was thought to resemble one.

Keukenhof will next be open from March 18th to May 9th, 2027.

Hazel Warhurst



NORTHERN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION



The NUA AGM will be held on **Saturday 24th October 2026** at Stockton Unitarian Centre. Members of the Northern Unitarian Association from Newcastle, Stockton and the wider area are invited to attend. The GA Presidents 2026-2027, **Rev Alex Bradley and Rev Jean Bradley**, will be with us for the weekend. They will be leading worship at **Newcastle Unitarians at 11.00am on Sunday 25th October** and at **Stockton Unitarians at 6.00pm on Sunday 25th October 2026**. This is your opportunity to meet the Presidents of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches.

Unitarian Women's Group Conference

Friday 11th to Sunday 13th September 2026

(4.00pm Friday to 2.00pm Sunday)

The Nightingale Centre, Great Hucklow, Derbyshire

The future of UWG

???

"Discussions and decisions about the future membership of the UWG, with particular emphasis on inclusion/exclusion of transgender, queer/gender fluid/etc people."

Women of all ages are welcome to this weekend of friendship

Listen Talk Think Laugh together

For booking form and more information

Contact Margaret Robinson at margaretrobinson81@gmail.com

or ring her on 07799 896452 or 01642 782219

(I'm also on WhatsApp)



Unitarian Music Society
Summer Conference
7th-10th August 2026
Nightingale Centre
Great Hucklow, Derbyshire

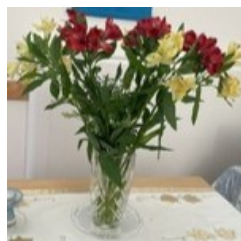
Peace and Joy

Contact :
Margaret Robinson UMS Secretary
margaretrobinson81@gmail.com

***Congratulations**
to those Celebrating their Birthday in*

July

Colin Partington
Colin Wilkinson
Andrew Watson
Paul W Robinson
Freda Laverick



August

Simon Watson
Jane Tomlin

Summer

The light is at the height of its power
The Sun shines fiercely.
But now that power must wane
Descending into the darkness
to be reborn.

*Light and darkness dance
in the crucible of desire
and bring forth life.
So we light the chalice flame
to represent life, hope,
love and laughter.*

Yvonne Aburrow

Stockton Unitarians Annual General Meeting

Sunday June 28th 2026

Following the evening service

**Deadline for the next edition of Church News is the
Wednesday 26th August 2026**

Please send your contributions for the September/October 2026
edition to the Editor: Margaret Robinson

margaretrobinson81@gmail.com

News from the GA EC

The GA's Executive Committee (EC) was warmly welcomed at the Graig Community Hub in Trebanos by the Gellionnen Chapel congregation on the weekend of 6th and 7th June 2026. We were glad to join the congregation for the inspiring and moving Interfaith Pride service on Sunday morning - thanks to Rev Rory Castle Jones and all at Gellionnen for making us so welcome.

Key messages from the meeting:

1. It was our first in-person meeting with Jean and Alex Bradley present as our new co-Presidents, and it was wonderful to hear of all their travels around the country so far.
2. We reviewed the recommendations of the Innovation Fund's independent assessment panel, and will be announcing details of new grant awards soon!
3. We received reports from the GA staff team and are grateful for their continuing hard work in supporting the Unitarian and Free Christian movement - and we welcome our new Communications Officer, Jess Ackroyd.
4. We looked ahead to the election of new EC members - the election process for new candidates to stand as trustees of the GA will begin in the autumn, for a four-year term to start from spring 2027. Now is a good time to start encouraging potential candidates to think about standing! We are always willing to have informal conversations to share more of what the role entails.
5. We discussed safeguarding and the importance of strong safeguarding knowledge at the local level in all of our congregations and districts. We recommend that congregational and district leaders sign up for the safeguarding training we are running with 31:8, the church safeguarding experts, this summer, to build skills and understanding alongside other Unitarians.

We are sorry to say goodbye to David Joseph, our Finance Manager, at the end of June, but wish him all the best for a happy and relaxing retirement.

Revs Jean and Alex Bradley, on the EC meeting.

Being together physically for the EC meeting, rather than online, gave a much greater sense of working on behalf of the GA. Sarah Benfield was an excellent Chairperson and worked well and steadily with Liz Slade throughout the agenda. We were very impressed by the co-operation and friendliness of the group as a whole as they worked closely to the agenda.

Uni-sing! A Zoom hymn singing group, with break-out groups for a chat in the middle. **Come and sing**
For more information email Louise Rogers
louise.rogers256@gmail.com

Or see [facebook.co/groups/ 687366168770017](https://facebook.co/groups/687366168770017)

Sessions: Saturdays 2.00pm (open 1.30pm) 4th and 18th July, (break in August) 5th and 19th September 2026

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: 30th June, 14th and 28th July, 11th and 25th August 2026.



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

Twitter now X: Stockton Unitarian Centre

Chairperson and Flower Secretary: Jean Watson - 01642 658376

Margaret Robinson - Secretary and Church News Editor
telephone: 01642 782219 mobile 07799 896452

email: margaretrobinson81@gmail.com

3 Castle Dyke Wynd, Minerva Mews, Yarm, TS15 9DE

Worship Committee Co-Ordinator: Margaret Whitham 01429 298641

Sunday Services 2026

Zoom link: 6680459646



Date	Time	Worship Leader
5th July	6.00pm	Rev Victor Ball
12th July	6.00pm	Bring and Share service on theme "JOY"
19th July	6.00pm	Rev Victor Ball
26th July	3.00pm	Brigitte and Rev Tom McCready
2nd August	tba	
9th August	tba	
16th August	tba	
23rd August	tba	
30th August	6.00pm	Diana Bebbly
6th September	6.00pm	tba
20th September	6.00pm	Diana Bebbly

Offers to lead worship would be appreciated, please contact Margaret Whitham 01429 298641

If you would like to contribute to the flower fund or buy flowers in memory of a loved one and have your name added to the flower list please let Jean Watson know. 01642 658376

Flower Rota for July and August 2026

5th July	Flower Fund
12th July	Mrs Smith and Mrs Fish
19th July	Gail Moore
26th July	Flower Fund
2nd August	Mrs Margaret Whitham
9th August	Rev Jeffrey Bowes
16th August	Mrs Josie Squires
23rd August	Mrs Freda Laverick
30th August	Rev Victor Ball
6th September	Rev Margaret Kirk



Please note all services will be held in the church building.

Most services will also be transmitted via **Zoom**, in a hybrid service. Joining information for Zoom will be sent out through email by the Church Secretary

- Zoom: **6680459646**

margaretrobinson81@gmail.com