

Memorial (Unitarian) Church

Home of progressive religion in Cambridge since 1904



The Church and its culture today

The church on Emmanuel Road is a beautiful small building inspired by Wren's chapel at Pembroke College. It dates from 1927. The church, and its handsome hall, library and offices (built 1923), is the home to a progressive religious institution rooted in the rationalist and tolerant Enlightenment movement that stretches back to John Locke, Isaac Newton and beyond.

What is distinctive is that the Memorial Church, and the Unitarian denomination, seriously engages with the problem that growing knowledge in the natural and human sciences leads to continuous change in people's religious outlook. For this reason, we meet together in a way that is non-dogmatic, for the service of humankind, in the spirit exemplified in the life of Jesus, and in a way that allows for a range of understandings of God, the divine and the sacred. We try to appreciate truth and goodness from a wide range of sources in religion, philosophy, science and the arts, especially music.

To those who seek out the church, in person or via the web, it offers nurture, spiritual sanctuary and inspiration as a source of pleasure and inspiration for living life well. We look to our Christian culture, and to a modern, minimalist form of spiritual thought and practice. We do this because the old forms of words, expressing the beliefs of past millennia, have led many people to think that the spiritual and ethical development offered by religion is irrelevant in modern life. It is not. It is as essential for human flourishing as ever.

Genuinely open and free conversation, in which people are encouraged to speak and develop their own spiritual and ethical faculties, is central to the culture here. Anyone accepting this liberty and flexibility will feel very much at home: theists/atheists, old/young, rich/poor, black/white, gay/straight, all faiths/none.

For more information:
cambridgeunitarian.org
01223 576952



History of the Unitarian movement—Freedom, Reason, Tolerance

Key to understanding our movement's history is our desire for complete spiritual freedom. It is toward this that, from the beginning until now, our communities have consciously or unconsciously struggled. The achievement of this has been accomplished in three distinct stages.

First, in the sixteenth-century there began a protest against the traditional dogmas as expressed in the historic Creeds and the substitution of new statements of Christian faith. We began to assert that "God was One" and it was because of this that we eventually came to be called "Unitarians" in distinction from "Trinitarians". In connection with this we further asserted that Jesus was *not* God but was *fully human* and that his "divinity" consisted in his *office* as a teacher and exemplar, not as the second *person* of the Trinity.

Second, there came a realisation of a conflict, actual or possible, between Scripture and reason. We began strongly to feel that, if a person were to be wholly free, reason must be accepted as the supreme authority.

Third, there came the further recognition of the equal authority of other men and women's reason. When this insight was put into practical effect it issued in the principle of full mutual tolerance of differing opinions.

It is important to see and to reiterate that, although the Unitarian movement began in the sixteenth-century by making certain doctrinal assertions, in truth these were only ever a sort of *by-product* of a much larger movement, one whose central motive has been the quest for complete spiritual *freedom*, the full use of human *reason* and the desire for genuine religious *tolerance*.

Unitarian beginnings in England

During the early part of the seventeenth-century Unitarian ideas found a particularly congenial home in the Low Countries where many Unitarian books were published. These books slowly found their way into the libraries of figures whose work decisively shaped English political and religious life, the most notable of these being **John Locke (1632-1704)**.

An important early English Unitarian was **John Biddle (1615-1662)**, often called "the Father of English Unitarianism", and he is believed to have been the translator of the first English version of the Polish Unitarians' *Racovian Catechism*.

Unitarian ideas also found a welcome in a number of Reformed and Independent churches in the 1640s and 50s, in particular amongst the English Presbyterians.

The *Act of Uniformity* (1662) gave rise to what became known as the *Great Ejection*. The Act prescribed that any minister who refused to conform to the Book of Common Prayer by St. Bartholomew's Day 1662 should be ejected from the Church of England. In consequence two thousand Puritan ministers left their positions as Church of England clergy. It was from within this *non-conformist* church tradition that our own modern denomination eventually developed.

Proclaiming the unity of God and the humanity of Jesus finally became legal in July 1813 when the British Parliament passed the *Unitarian Toleration Act*, also known as the *Unitarian Relief Act* or the *Trinity Act*.

Early Unitarians in Cambridge

Influential Cambridge figures who adopted a Unitarian viewpoint were:

- ***Sir Isaac Newton, F.R.S. (1642-1727)*** whose unorthodox religious views were known to his friends and are clearly stated in his posthumously published religious writings.
- ***William Whiston (1667-1752)*** who succeeded Isaac Newton as Lucasian Professor of Mathematics.
- ***Richard Porson (1759-1808)*** a Fellow of Trinity who showed that the verse *1 John 5:7* concerning the three heavenly witnesses (which was considered to be a text proving the doctrine of the Trinity) was a very late addition to the text.
- ***Theophilus Lindsey (1723-1808)*** Fellow of St. John's and later Vicar of Catterick who, in 1774, resigned his living to become minister of the first openly avowed Unitarian congregation in England at Essex Street in London.
- ***William Frend (1757-1841)*** mathematician and Fellow of Jesus who resigned his living as Vicar of Madingley in 1787 when he became a Unitarian.

Foundation of the Cambridge Unitarian Church

A Cambridge congregation was not formally founded until 1904 following a series of lectures on the *Historical Jesus and the Theological Christ* by the Unitarian scholar and lecturer in Comparative Religion at the University of Oxford, ***J. Estlin Carpenter (1844-1927)***. It met first of all in the rooms of ***F. J. M. Stratton (1881-1960)*** on Downing Street. Stratton was the Professor of Astrophysics at the University of Cambridge from 1928 to 1947.

In 1923 the present church hall was built and was in use as the church until the construction of the present building in 1927.

Both the hall and the church were designed by **Ronald Potter Jones FRIBA (1876-1965)** and his architectural ideas concerning church building can be found in his book *Nonconformist Church Architecture* (Lindsey Press, London, 1914).

An important Cambridge figure in the congregation during the 1960s and 70s was **Lord McNair of Gleniffer F.B.A. (1885-1975)** who became Professor of Law at Cambridge and who was also Vice-Chancellor of Liverpool University, President of the International Court of Justice and also President of this church.

In the light of all the above this congregation continues to strive for a broader understanding among religious and secular groups and endeavours, in a spirit of enquiry, to appreciate truth, beauty and goodness in whatever form of religion or philosophy these may be found.



Sunday Services

Morning Service—Sunday 10.30-11.30am

A family service of prayers, hymns, readings, and a sermon with a brief opportunity for comment. As more young families are joining the congregation, a Sunday Club for under 14s will be launched shortly.

Evening Service—Sunday 6.30-7.30pm

A quiet service of mindful meditation
In winter this is held by candlelight

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The present church community offers exposure to stimulating and varied *thought* from Christianity and beyond, opportunities for personal *growth*, and a *community* that is kindly, lively, open-minded and truthful.

Thought

A liberal Christian tradition that is in line with contemporary, secular culture.

Opportunities to explore a wide body of philosophy—as inspiration for living our lives well.

Access to the teaching of the human Jesus.

The freedom to change as our understanding of the natural world and society grows.

Growth

The means to build moral strength, courage and conscience.

The means to recognise grace in our lives.

Development of intellectual and spiritual resilience for times of trouble.

A grateful understanding rooted in science of our place in nature.

Access to confidential and kindly counsel in times of need.

Practices of contemplation, prayer, meditation and study.

Community

A clear-eyed and open-minded community of fellow travellers.

The Christian Year as the basic framework for our personal, family and congregational life.

Rites of passage that are focussed fully on the people involved.

Here there is only one orthodoxy: a love of truth that is a sincere desire to understand how the world is and our place in it.

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