

Memorial (Unitarian) Church

Home of liberal religion in Cambridge since 1904



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 sixteenth-century Radical Reformation and the rationalist and tolerant traditions of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

We are a community of people who take their religion, or their spirituality, liberally. That is to say, we hold that all people have the right to believe what their own life-experience tells them is true; what the prompting of their own conscience tells them is right. We say that each person's spiritual or intuitive experience deserves respect; that everyone's deep reflection and reasoning on religious and ethical questions should be taken

Unitarians form a movement that tries to put these affirmations into practice. Our local religious community offers a setting where people can worship, explore, and share faith together in an atmosphere of freedom and mutual respect.

Where does the word "Unitarian" come from?

Its roots lie in the Radical Reformation of 16th-century Europe. At that time Protestant Christians claimed the right to read the Bible in their own languages and to interpret it for themselves.

Some who did so found that it spoke of one God, without qualification. This did not square with the orthodox

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cambridgeunitarian.org
01223 576952**



Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which says that God consists of three “persons”. Because these people believed God to be a “unity” rather than a “trinity” they became known as “Unitarians”.

Does “Unitarian” have the same meaning today?

Unitarians are less likely to argue about such strictly theological issues today. We now place more stress on the importance of liberty of conscience in matters of faith.

It is still true, though, that most Unitarians affirm the oneness of God: the Divine Unity. Traditionally this was about God as one “person”. Nowadays, however, God’s unity is often seen rather differently: as the oneness of that Ground of Being within which we and all things come to be. Following from this, many Unitarians affirm that the infinite variety and diversity of the universe is connected and enfolded in a transcendent oneness. Thus unity is the true and essential nature of things.

Just as creation is one, so too humanity is one and the human person is one. What divides is less important than what unites. That which unites - the ultimate unifying principle or spirit - is what many Unitarians mean today when speaking of God.

Are Unitarians Christians?

As to whether any Unitarian, or anyone else, is a Christian is really for that person to decide.

From the earliest days of the Church there have been many different ideas about what being a Christian means. Much suffering has been caused by the resultant disputes, persecutions and wars. This sad record has led some Unitarians to regard the term “Christian” with disfavour. For them it is too hung about with unacceptable baggage to be worth retaining.

There are also those who simply do not base their belief system on the Christian tradition. Some of these define their position as religious humanist. Others favour a broader theism, an earth-centred spirituality or a faith that draws principally on religions other than Christianity.

However, here we hold Jesus in high regard. We favour a simple and inclusive definition of the word Christian. Thus a Christian is any person who seeks to live in accord with the life and teachings of Jesus, who identifies with what is best in the Christian tradition, and who, perhaps, sees in Jesus a revelation of the God who is immanent in all people. This is the wellspring of love that permeated his nature and his ministry.

In this sense, many Unitarians are Christians. And we also recognise as such all who share the same spirit, whatever their position on the Christian theological spectrum.

Early Unitarians in Cambridge

Influential people in Cambridge 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

The 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 congregation.

Sunday Services

Morning Service—Sunday 10.30-11.30am

A service of prayers, hymns, music, readings and an address with a brief opportunity for comment.

Evening Service—Sunday 6.30-7.30pm

A quiet service of mindful meditation.

For more information

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Much of the text above is taken from Cliff Reed's book
Unitarian? What's That?

The full text of this can be found at the following address:
<https://www.cambridgeunitarian.org/reflection/reading>