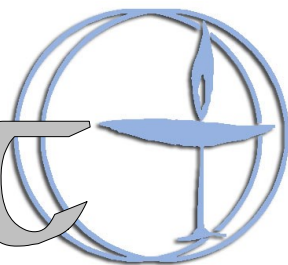


# Oscailt



April 2021

IRELANDS UNITARIAN MAGAZINE

Vol.17 Nº 4



# Oscailt

**Oscailt** since January 2005 has become the monthly magazine for Irish Unitarians. Originally it was the calendar for Dublin but due to popular demand by non members this new format was born and continues to grow and flourish.

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**Front Cover:** Early morning fisherman Boka Bay Montenegro.  
(photo P.Spain)

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# Oscailt

Our magazine title, *Oscailt*, is inspired by the account of the **Healing of the Deaf and Mute Man** in St. Mark's Gospel, Chapter 7. Jesus commands the mans ears to open up with Aramic word "Ephphatha" - open ! The Irish word *oscailt*, (from the verb *oscail*, to open), means an opening, or, metaphorically, it could mean a revelation or a beginning.

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112 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin D02 YP23, Ireland.

**Service: Sunday at 11a.m. Phone: Vestry 01-4780638**

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PodCast of the church service is available on the church website.

LOVE IS THE DOCTRINE OF THIS CHURCH  
THE QUEST OF TRUTH IS ITS SACRAMENT  
AND SERVICE IS ITS PRAYER.

TO DWELL TOGETHER IN PEACE

TO SEEK KNOWLEDGE IN FREEDOM

TO SERVE MANKIND IN FELLOWSHIP

TO THE END THAT ALL SOULS SHALL GROW IN HARMONY  
WITH THE DIVINE

THIS DO WE COVENANT WITH EACH OTHER AND WITH GOD.

## UNITARIAN CHURCH Prince's Street, Cork.

**Service: Sundays at 11a.m.**

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# Dublin Unitarian Church

112 St.Stephens Green Dublin D02 YP23.

**Service 11.00a.m.**

## Sunday Rota for April 2021

### **4<sup>th</sup> April**

Service	<b>Rev.Bridget Spain</b>	<i>If there was no Resurrection</i>
Reader	Tony Brady	

### **11<sup>th</sup> April**

Service	<b>Rev.Bridget Spain</b>	<i>Do we need God ?</i>
Reader	Patrick Rogers	

### **18<sup>th</sup> April**

Service	<b>Keith Thoughton</b>	<i>T.B.A.</i>
Reader	Jennifer Buller	

### **25<sup>th</sup> April**

Service	<b>Rev.Bridget Spain</b>	<i>Religious Make-over</i>
Reader	Elaine Harris	

**Services are broadcast live from the church each Sunday at 11a.m.**

**On our WebCam, click and connect at  
[www.dublinunitarianchurch.org](http://www.dublinunitarianchurch.org)**

**PodCast are also available at the same website.**

# **DUBLIN UNITARIAN CHURCH**

## **ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

**The 2021 A.G.M. of the Congregation will  
take place on ZOOM at 7.30 p.m.**

**Monday, 26<sup>th</sup> April 2021.**

Send nominations, motions, and any  
other items for the Agenda to the:

[secretary@dublinunitarianchurch.org](mailto:secretary@dublinunitarianchurch.org)

The closing date for the receipt nominations etc.  
**Monday, 29<sup>th</sup> March 2021.**

*Dennis F. Aylmer*  
Chairman

# Presbyterians and Unitarians

This church is affiliated to the Non Subscribing Presbyterian church of Ireland.

The word Presbyterian refers to how a church is governed; not beliefs. Roman Catholic and Anglican churches are governed by a hierarchy of priest, bishop and Archbishop.

In the Presbyterian system, each church is responsible for its governance but local churches come together in a group or presbytery for mutual support. Ministers are appointed by the Congregation and church affairs are managed by a Managing Committee or a Session on behalf of the members. Presbyterianism is a democratic system of governance.

There are thirty two churches in the NSPCI. There is a broad spectrum of beliefs within these churches. Some are liberal others are conservative. All of them abide by the principle of "Freedom of conscience in matters of religion"

One obvious difference between churches within the NSPCI is that some of them use only readings from the Bible in their services. The service will have a reading from the Old Testament, one from the New Testament with perhaps a psalm. It is the familiar prayer, hymn, sermon sandwich type of service; the same as our service except that over the past thirty or so years **we** usually use readings from sources outside of the Bible.

This format of service is almost as old as Christianity itself. There is a document in existence referred to as the 2<sup>nd</sup> letter of Clement. The document is dated between 95 - 140 CE; the very early days of the Christian Church. The 2<sup>nd</sup> letter of Clement is not a letter nor was it written by Clement. It is the earliest known account of a Christian service of worship.

The service begins with words of the prophet Isaiah (54) which are reinterpreted in the light of the new Christian beliefs. Then the leader goes on to quote and then explain the words of Jesus to the congregation. The service leader exhorts the congregation to live their new faith every day not just on Sundays. It is not OK to just be a Sunday Christian - sounds very familiar. The congregation also sang hymns.

I find it moving to think that for more than two thousand years people have gathered as we do on Sundays to reset their thinking and hopefully to find comfort or inspiration for how to live better. But are we wrong to look for our inspiration outside of the Bible? Many Christians would say that what we do is heresy; I disagree with them. I believe that like every thing in existence religion must evolve to remain relevant. 2<sup>nd</sup> Clement is evidence of how Christianity has changed.

When the author of Clement quotes the words of Jesus he is not quoting from the Gospels that are familiar to us. Nor are the quotations from Paul or James in the Epistles. Clement is quoting from the Gospel of Peter and from the Coptic Gospel of Thomas. These documents and other Gospels and Epistles present a different version of the Christian story than the one we are used to hearing.

The Gospel of Peter has an account of what happened the night before the Resurrection. We know that guards watched the tomb in which Jesus was laid; they were told not to interfere to watch and report. The Gospel of Peter says that during the night two individuals entered the tomb; then three men emerged “two supporting the other”. A short time later another person was seen to enter the tomb. This is a different account the Resurrection.

The Coptic Gospel of Thomas is a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus some of them are very familiar others are unknown some are cryptic. Saying 12 is an account of when Jesus appointed his successor.

Saying 12 The disciples said to Jesus “We know that you will depart from us. Who is to be our leader?”

Jesus said to them. “Wherever you are, you are to go to James the righteous for whose sake heaven and earth came into being” Jesus was referring to his Brother James the leader of Christians in Jerusalem. Jesus did not mention Peter or Saint Paul no rock or church no keys to the kingdom of heaven.

The writings mentioned in 2<sup>nd</sup> Clement are part of a huge number of documents that were never adopted as the official canon of the Roman Church. So from the beginning there were very different “Bibles.”

Of course Dublin was not the first Unitarian church to make use of resources outside of the Bible. Two hundred years

ago in Presbyterian churches in the Boston area there was hot debate about the place of the Bible in Christian worship. The debates were led by William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker. When they questioned the doctrine of Trinity their ministers were excluded from the pulpits of more traditional churches. These ministers went on to form the nucleus of American Unitarianism.

These ministers were influenced by the Enlightenment ideas of Thomas Paine and Joseph Priestly. Joseph Priestly the scientist insisted that religion must conform to "Conscience, Science and Reason". This group went on to form the Transcendental Club. Among other things the Club advocated life long learning. So in addition to insisting that Religion must conform to Conscience, Science and Reason they wanted educated congregations; people who would practice their faith from conviction.

Rev. Theodore Parker differentiated between what he called the permanent truth of Christianity and the words and traditions that developed after the death of Jesus. So Jesus said that we must "Love God and love our neighbour as ourselves". Jesus said that our neighbour is all mankind these teachings are eternally true. This is how we are meant to live.

Everything outside of the teaching of Jesus connected with the Christian religion is of human origin. Creeds and dogma are manmade. Hierarchical structures are manmade. The Bible is the creation of humans. The Bible has mistakes, contradictions and all the problems that come with a work that has been translated between multiple languages. This book has been used to inflict cruelty and cause suffering.

Parker wrote that "The books that help you the most are those which make you think the most." I wonder has anyone has ever been inspired or provoked into changing how they live from their reading of the Old Testament?

To day in mainstream christen Churches the Old Testament reading is from the Book of Numbers 21: 4 - 9. It is the story of the Israelites in the wilderness. They are discontent because of the tough conditions. They rail against God and Moses and god sends snakes into the camp and many Israelites are bitten by the snakes. Moses prays for them God tells Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Those who are bitten

and look on the bronze snake will live. I wonder if a single Christian will be inspired by that reading.

Ralph Waldo Emerson did resign from active ministry but continued to write and speak publicly about religion. For Emerson, God was not found in a church or in books, or words or discussions but in spending time close to nature.

There is a risk for Unitarian congregations. When we live by the words “Conscience, Science and Reason”; Or when we are critical of the origins of religion, we run the risk of confusing talking about religion with nurturing the spirit. The two are very different. We must remain clear sighted that Reason guides us. We must also remember that finding our full humanity is about nurturing the soul.

There was a lovely piece in Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> March Irish Times. The writer referred to a picture of a lovely misty lake with a person sitting in a kayak. The caption read.

*“Religion is someone sitting in church thinking of kayaking.  
Spirituality is someone sitting in a kayak thinking of God”.*

Our Challenge is that we find a balance between religion and nurturing the spirit.

*Rev.Bridget Spain*

Minister Dublin Unitarian Church

Dublin 14<sup>th</sup> March 2021

# Oscar Romero

As I sit here at my computer to write this article, it strikes me, “well, where else would I be?”. Like everyone else in the ROI, if not confined to home, I am confined to a travel radius of just 5km from my front door. That by the way takes me exactly to the gates of the local dump! There is perhaps an irony or a lesson in there somewhere, but I am stubborn and persistent in my refusal to acknowledge it! As I write, it is Wednesday the 24<sup>th</sup> of March, my head is swirling with a list of things that need to be done, not least a service and sermon for Sunday, but the I suspect like many others during lockdown, I have become a big fan of that age old saying; “tomorrows another day”.

Today ( March 24<sup>th</sup>) is the ***United Nations International day for the right to truth of victims of human rights violations and abuse***. Created by a motion of the UN in 2010, it is a reminder that despite our noble aspirations, we can be a cruel race, inflicting war, killing and torture on anyone who stands in our way. As we can treat our fellow human beings with kindness, care and affection, we can also end a life as if it were a wasp threatening to sting us on a summers day.

In his message for the day, the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres said; *“As we recognise the courage of human rights defenders everywhere, let us commit to protect those who seek truth and justice and provide victims with effective remedies and restore their dignity”*.

The date chosen was by no means random, it was chosen to honour the memory of a man who encapsulated all in the secretary generals statement. In our Unitarian tradition, we do not have saints in the formal sense of the elevation of an individual to special status by virtue of canonization. We do, however, recognise that some individuals leave an indelible mark on the world, a permanent footprint that the passage of tie will not erode, a footprint that points the way to a better way of living, of seeing the world and our neighbour. Today, March the 24<sup>th</sup> is the fest day of one such man, the UN sanctioned day is in his honour.

Oscar Arnulfo Romero Y Galdanez was born in 1917 in the

san Miguel district of El Salvador, despite being highly proficient in carpentry, the trade his father wanted him to take, the young Oscar set his sights on the priesthood. Entering the seminary, he would complete his studies at Rome's Gregorian University, being ordained in 1942. In scenes reminiscent of today, his parents and siblings couldn't attend their sons big day because of travel restrictions in place due to World War II. He would return to work in a parish in San Miguel, in fact he stayed in the same parish for twenty years. Hard working and diligent to his calling among his major reforms was the introduction of Alcoholics Anonymous into the district. He was then appointed rector of the local seminary and while on a retreat to alleviate symptoms of exhaustion he was diagnosed by a psychiatrist as having Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder or OCD as it is more commonly known. Priests who knew and worked with him have described him as being "scrupulous".

By 1977, his appointment as Archbishop of San Salvador came as something of a shock. It was welcomed by the government who didn't see him as a threat or a troublemaker, he was seen as a "safe pair of hands". For the clergy, his appointment was not a welcome one, Romero did not approve of Marxist/ liberation theology, he was very much a supporter of the Magisterium of the catholic church. Latter that year his world would be turned upside down by the killing of his close friend, Fr.Rutillio Grande, a Jesuit known for his work with the poor and for giving a voice to the victims of government oppression and human rights abuses. His death had a profound effect on the "safe pair of hands" that was the archbishop of San Salvador. He later said: "When I looked at Rutillio lying there dead, I thought, if they have killed him for doing what he did, I too have to walk the same path".

The blood- soaked landscape of El Salvador was to get worse when in 1979 the Right - Wing Junta government took power. Romero openly attacked the United States for supplying military aid. He wrote a scathing letter to President Jimmy Carter. During this time people were tortured, executed and "disappeared", many were priests sympathetic to cause of the rebels. Romero became the junta's most outspoken critic reaching the nation by way of his weekly sermons broadcast on the church owned radio station, YSAX, that was when it wasn't bombed off the air.

On March the 23<sup>rd</sup> during his weekly broadcast, he urged the soldiers of the El Salvadorian army to remember their Christian values and to stop the torture killing and abuses. The following evening, he was saying mass in the chapel of a hospice, which was also his home, he had refused to live in the Archbishop's palace. Finishing his sermon, he stepped away from the lectern, as he did so, a lone gunman entered the chapel and shot Romero through the heart, he died instantly. He was just 63 years of age. No one has ever been prosecuted for his murder.

At his funeral, smoke bombs were exploded as a distraction as gunmen opened fire from buildings overlooking the proceedings. Official government figures say 31 people were killed, eye-witnesses say up to 50. Among those attending the funeral was the late Bishop of Galway, Eammon Casey, a friend of Romero's, in fact, Casey revealed he had received a letter from Romero on the day he was killed. Indeed, Casey was praised for helping those fleeing the attack.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of October 2018, Pope Francis raised Oscar Romero to the status of saint. Part of the delay seems to have been the Vatican deciding whether he had been killed for his faith or for political reasons. A statue of him was erected at Westminster Abbey, he stands alongside Martin Luther King and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in the gallery of 20<sup>th</sup> century martyrs. In Dublin, the Romero Centre promotes awareness about El Salvador and last year in Glenstal abbey, the newest member of the community of Benedictine monks, took as his religious name; Bro. Oscar.

As I said earlier, as Unitarians, we do not do saints, but if we did.....

*Rev. Mike O'Sullivan*

Minister Unitarian Church Cork.

Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> March 2021

# **Irish Unitarianism**

**where have we come from and how did we get here?**

[Originally given in 1999 as an address entitled A History of Unitarianism in 5½ Chapters this is being reprinted here in response to some interest shown in the subject after Bridget's address on Unitarianism and Presbyterianism on Sunday, 14<sup>th</sup> March, see page 5. ]

At first I was rather daunted by the mammoth task of presenting the history of Irish Unitarianism, but then I remembered reading a book by Julian Barnes entitled *The History of the World in 10½ Chapters*. Now if Julian Barnes can manage the history of the world in 10½ chapters, then I ought to be able to cover something like the history of Unitarianism in Ireland in about 3½ or 4½. Or so I thought. In fact it took me 5, and here they are:

## **Chapter 1. Influential Visitors.**

The origins of Unitarianism in Ireland lie with visitors to our shores who arrived here in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. English settlers came to Leinster and Munster, and Scottish settlers came to Ulster. Among these people were significant groups of Puritans, followers of the Protestant religion which had emerged from the Reformation, but who were beginning to cultivate their own ethos. In those early days, Puritan clergy were still tolerated within the Established Church. So these settlers were able to establish their own congregations, and worship as they wished. One of the earliest of these congregations was in Bandon, Co. Cork, where in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries a number of settlers from the south-west of England had taken up residence. And in Ulster the earliest record is in Ballycarry where a minister named Edward Brice began to preach in 1613.

Halfway through the 17<sup>th</sup> century, toleration of these Puritan

ministers came to an end. In 1665 the Irish Act of Uniformity was passed in the Irish Parliament, making it compulsory for all ministers to conform and to use the Book of Common Prayer in all places of public worship. In England, three years previously, a similar Act had caused hundreds of ministers to resign their livings in protest and leave the Established Church; these people were the original Dissenters or Nonconformists, and the forerunners of English Unitarianism. In Ireland the same thing happened; a number of ministers of the Established Church left it, and with their congregations went out on their own. This resulted in the formation in Dublin of four new Dissenting Congregations: Wood Street, New Row, Cook Street and Capel Street, all led by ministers described as “among the most eminent and godly of the city”. Other similar congregations were established elsewhere in the country in addition to the existing one in Bandon: one in the 1660s in Tipperary town, and one in Clonmel in the 1670s. The passing of the Act of Uniformity, as well as causing the formation of all these congregations, had another associated and very significant result. This was the creation in Ireland of a separate religious identity, that of Protestant Dissent, which absorbed the earlier Puritan ethos, and formed the main rootstock from which Irish Unitarianism was to grow.

More congregations were established in Ulster, too, at about the same time, but for different reasons. The catalyst there was the arrival in 1642 of a Scottish army to protect the Protestant settlers imposed earlier in the century on the native Irish population by the Plantation of Ulster. The Presbyterian chaplains of these regiments met together that same year to form the first presbytery meeting ever held in this country. Thus 1642 marks the beginning of organised Presbyterianism in Ireland, and from this, Nonsubscribing Presbyterianism would eventually emerge.

## Chapter 2. **The First Unitarians**

During the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century a reluctance to accept the doctrine of the Trinity began to appear in some religious thought and writing. This was not yet called Unitarianism, but Arianism,

after a Christian priest who lived in Alexandria during the 4<sup>th</sup> century. (He had preached that Christ was not of one substance with God.)

Arianism was regarded, even in the Dissenting churches, as a heresy, and Thomas Emlyn, minister in Dublin to the Wood Street congregation, was tried and imprisoned for blasphemy after the publication in 1702 of his book explaining and defending his Arian views. Emlyn was an influential figure, and, interestingly, he was the first minister anywhere to use the name Unitarian.

If the Dublin Dissenters were alarmed by this - as they saw it - heretical doctrine, so were the Ulster Presbyterians. Their weapon against Arianism was to try to make all their ministers sign the Westminster Confession of Faith, the statement containing the rigid doctrines of Calvinism. But many of the ministers in Ulster were uneasy about these doctrines, and particularly uneasy about the idea of enforcing them. John Abernethy, the leader of the New Light movement, and sixteen other ministers, refused to sign, or to 'subscribe', as it was called, and consequently in 1726 they and their congregations were expelled from the Presbyterian Synod of Ulster. This was the birth of the Nonsubscribing Presbyterian Church, and Abernethy's little group is described (W.G. Tarrant) as becoming in the course of time 'distinctly Unitarian'. Interestingly, some years later Abernethy was called to be minister of the Wood Street congregation in Dublin, where Emlyn had been minister before his imprisonment. Abernethy's influence was to consolidate Emlyn's, so that this congregation also was soon to become 'Arian in tone, and steadily gravitate towards ultimate Unitarianism' (E.M. Wilbur). So here we have the considered opinion of two Unitarian historians that these two groups of congregations, one in Ulster and one in Dublin, were heading for what we know as Unitarianism.

### **Chapter 3.**

## **Controversy and Conspiracy.**

As the 18<sup>th</sup> century drew to a close, I get the impression that religious life for those of Dissenting views in Ireland was fairly tranquil. I also got the impression from some comments I read that the majority of Dissenting sermons at this period were very long and extremely dull - perhaps that is the price one pays for tranquillity. In the

South, Dublin had its congregations in Strand Street (the new location for the old church in Wood Street) and in Eustace Street (this congregation had absorbed the congregation from New Row). The other congregations outside Dublin, in Clonmel, Cork, Tipperary, Summerhill etc. seem to have been jogging along nicely. And in Ulster, affairs seemed equable too; the old bitterness between Subscribers and Nonsubscribers had receded into the background, and the issue seemed less important than formerly, to the extent that a gradual merging of the two wings of Presbyterianism seemed at the least not beyond the bounds of possibility. Sadly, all this was to change.

In Ulster, just as 100 years previously the orthodox wing of Presbyterianism had attempted to force conformity on the free-thinking, Arian-influenced, wing, so it happened again. An authoritarian Calvinistic Presbyterian, Henry Cooke, took it upon himself to rescue Irish Presbyterianism from the 'bog of indifference and moral laxity' into which he was convinced it was, because of the influence of Arian views, in grave danger of sinking. 'We must put down Arianism, or it will put down us,' he said in 1825, and he embarked on a campaign to do just that - to stamp out Arianism - or, as it was coming to be called, Unitarianism. He did not get it all his own way, and was ably opposed by Henry Montgomery, the 'Lion of Dunmurry', but Cooke won the day, and Montgomery and his followers, like Abernethy before him, left the Northern Presbyterian Synod to form their own Nonsubscribing group. Cooke's energies did not confine themselves to the North. Some at least of the zeal generated by his crusade to rid his own Presbyterian church of doctrinal error, as he put it, took the form of trying to rid the Dissenting congregations in the South of doctrinal error as well. Presbyterian missions were formed, and sent to the Unitarian congregations in Bandon and Tipperary and Clonmel, and (from the mainstream Presbyterian point of view) these were successful. Some of the congregations split, some reverted to mainstream Presbyterianism, and some merged with, and became absorbed by, nearby mainstream Presbyterian congregations. The only Unitarian congregation to survive outside Dublin was the one in Cork.

This is an over-simplification. Henry Cooke can't be blamed for the entire decline of Unitarianism in virtually the whole of Munster. Other complex social and political factors were at work as well. Many liberal and Dissenting ministers, because of their concern for democracy and human rights, had sympathised with the 1798 Rebellion, and some had actually been involved in it. One modern historian

(Flann Campbell) is of the opinion that the defeat of 1798 was a very significant and damaging blow for Dissenters all over the country. Another factor was the decline of those industries which had brought Protestants to this country in the first place; an example of this was the decline of the woollen industry in Bandon in the last century which led to emigration and the disintegration of the congregation there. And everywhere was the devastation left by the Famine, which resulted in appallingly difficult social conditions and massive emigration.

Meanwhile Dublin was holding firm, and under a succession of able and committed Unitarian ministers our two congregations of Strand Street and Eustace Street were preserved from the worst effects of all these influences. In Eustace Street Martineau made his all too brief appearance as minister, and, as Emlyn had done, put Dublin once more on the Unitarian map. In Strand Street, W.H. Drummond, whose portrait used to hang in the vestry, was minister for over 40 years. He was a dedicated and devoted Unitarian; I read a long and very spirited article which he wrote to defend Unitarianism against detractors, and I felt that really, with people like that to stand up for it, his co-religionists need have had no worries. And as the century progressed, Irish Unitarianism was further strengthened and deepened by the influence of William Ellery Channing, the great American Unitarian, whose writings were widely available here, and readily assimilated.

## Chapter 4. **Forgotten Unitarians.**

It will not have escaped your notice that everyone mentioned so far in this potted history of Irish Unitarianism is male. Were there no women? Where were they? Search as I would, I could find no trace of the mothers, sisters and daughters who must have played some part in this story, but who have not been written into it. Consideration of the reasons for this exclusion must wait for another day, but in deference to all those women who lived and worked and worshipped with their Dissenting and Unitarian communities and whose names we shall probably never know, let me tell you about James

Martineau's little daughter.

To find out about her we need to go to the opposite corner of Stephen's Green. You will remember that some months ago when Paddy McElroy was taking the service, he took us on a verbal tour of the Green, giving us a picture of its atmosphere and its interconnectedness with the life of Dublin. Well, I would like you to extend that tour to a little spot just outside the Green, on the other side of the road, beyond the Shelbourne Hotel. You probably know it; it's the Huguenot cemetery, a pleasant tranquil oasis in the middle of the frenetic commercial and social life that swirls around it. Soon after his appointment to Dublin, James Martineau married, and brought his wife to Ireland. Their first baby, a daughter, was born here. She died when she was only six months old, and she is buried in the Huguenot cemetery. Two years later, before he and his wife left Ireland, it is recorded that the last thing they did was to visit the cemetery and stand together at their daughter's grave.

And, years later, when Martineau, famous now, and revered as one of the great thinkers of his day, revisited Ireland as an old man to receive an honorary degree from Trinity College, he took time off from the excitement and the celebrations and, with another daughter beside him, stood once more for a while at the little graveside.

There is another story that deserves to be told. This concerns the forgotten congregation of Summerhill, in County Meath. We don't know much about the congregation - it was started in 1714 by the Langford family and was probably never very big - but it is mentioned in a list of all the congregations in the Southern Association in 1804, and it survived into Famine times.

The minister at the time of the Famine was Samuel Craig. The dreaded potato blight hit the area with a vengeance, local doctrinal and class differences were forgotten, and a Relief Committee was formed, of which our Mr. Craig was secretary. On him seems to have fallen the lion's share of the administration. He organised a stirabout kitchen, with staff, a boiler of 150 gallons, a ticket system for applicants, and a team of carters to draw meal and coal. For a period of twelve months he fed, on a daily basis, an average of about 1,000 people.

Then at the end of the Famine, when the Famine fever set in, the task of coping seems to have been shouldered by him as well. He turned the farmyard loft of a neighbouring nobleman into a fever hospital. The doctor seems to have been reluctant to visit the patients in person because of the risk of infection, so Samuel Craig, note-book in

hand, examined every patient and reported back to the doctor, who prescribed accordingly. In cases of death, which occurred daily in the area, he went personally to the house, pronounced death, and ordered the coffin. We read that some of the sights he witnessed in the houses of fever-stricken families at that time are too horrible to mention (C.H. Irwin): ‘fathers and husbands hopelessly drunk, wives and children lying dead, no friend left to perform the necessary offices to the sick and dying -and all the while this young minister, of a different religion from most of them, was labouring day and night to alleviate their suffering, stay the ravages of disease, and perform the most menial offices in his errand of mercy. Many acts of heroism were performed in the years of Famine-time and in the years of the fever and the cholera, but none more heroic than these.’ More than 150 years have passed since the Famine, but that Unitarian minister of Summerhill deserves to be remembered.

## Chapter 5. **What's in a Name?**

In Chapter 3 left our congregations, somewhat beleaguered, in the mid 1850s. In Ulster we left two groups who in different centuries had voted with their feet and walked out of the orthodox Presbyterian Synod. These were of course Abernethy's Arian Nonsubscribers of 1726 and Montgomery's Unitarian Nonsubscribers of 1830. In 1910 these two bodies merged to form the General Synod of the Nonsubscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland.

In Munster, although the rural areas of the south and west of Ireland no longer had any practising Unitarian congregations, the church in Cork continued to function. In Dublin, the two remaining Unitarian congregations of Strand Street and Eustace Street merged to come here to Stephen's Green Unitarian Church in 1863. So the old Southern Association, which according to a government list of about 1804 represented eleven congregations, now represented only two, Dublin and Cork, and became known as the Synod of Munster.

In 1934, partly for political reasons, the Synod of Munster merged with the Nonsubscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland.

There had of course over the centuries been constant interchange and mutual respect between Dublin and Munster Unitarians and Ulster Nonsubscribers; they attended each others' meetings and exchanged ministers, ideas and influences, so to a certain extent the merger was merely formalising the mutual support structure which had existed between the two groups North and South since the days of Emlyn and Abernethy. The original and dominant influences behind each tradition were undoubtedly different, in that in Ulster the religious influence was Scottish Presbyterianism, whereas in Leinster and Munster it was English Puritanism, but the process was the same - an example of what scientists would call convergent evolution.

This explains why our congregation, while retaining its independent identity, is today administered under the umbrella of the Nonsubscribers. We are, of course, also affiliated, as they are, to the General Assembly of the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, with head-quarters in London, thus maintaining our links with British Unitarianism which has also supplied us with ideas and ministers over the centuries.

Historically speaking, this brings us more or less up to the present day. Irish Unitarianism has developed from the Protestant Dissent of the early years, through the Unitarian Christianity shaped by Martineau, Drummond and Channing, to what one might call the inclusive Unitarianism of the present. Because Unitarians have, since the days of Emlyn, been expected to use their minds, our faith has been able to enlarge itself, and to find inspiration and direction, wisdom and solace, not just from Christianity, but from other sources as well. This for me is the great strength of our religion: the fact that it can absorb the infinite complexities of modern-day living while remaining true to its origins, and grow, rather than diminish in the process. We have the privilege of retaining the great thoughts and convictions of past Unitarians which still speak to us individually, we have our tap-root which goes straight back to the teaching of Jesus, and we have the freedom to take on board those aspects of other ways of looking at the world which seem to us to make sense. Inclusive Unitarianism allows us to fuse all these elements within ourselves, and to forge our own relationship with that which we call God. It seems to me that this is the stage in which Irish Unitarianism now finds itself. And so the long trail of the story of Irish Unitarianism ends here, in Stephen's Green Church. With us. And seeing the work and the commitment and the vibrancy of this congregation, I think it

is fair to say that Irish Unitarianism is alive and well, and living in Dublin.

*Jennifer Flegg*

Dublin Unitarian Church

Revised March 2021

# Window Theatre

I've got two minutes to be back in time for online classes, yet I veer towards that one house to stare in its front room window. Taped to the glass is a cardboard sign with the words 'Window Theatre' covered in colourful fabrics. A new scene from 'Romeo and Juliet' is set up each day using Sylvanian Families and other household items. Today shows Mercutio's rigid body with a toothpick sticking out of his neck and a trail of blood-red fabric. Behind him is a gravestone that reads 'a plague o'er both your houses' and next to him is Tybalt, similarly slew. The most prominent figure is a large squirrel teddy with a ring on its head and a makeshift phone in its hand. It's Prince Escalus and he's tweeting that Romeo has been banished. The clear cutting sun partly blocks my view, but I leave with a smile on my face and a sated curiosity about my neighbours' hobbies.

In the evening, I can see inside some of the apartments across from my bedroom. Their dimly lit lamps create shadow puppets out of the inhabitants and often, I eagerly watch the drama of their lives unfold. Whether it's a couple watching TV, or a man exercising on the stairs, or even that woman who paces back and forth mindlessly for hours, it's a welcome portal into anyone else's life. One of my favourite past-times is guessing what movie is being projected onto the wall of a top-floor apartment. It's funny how most movies seem indistinguishable from each other when you're squinting in the darkness trying to recognise the famous faces. However, it's not as captivating as seeing multiple squares of people going about their day, unaware of what is happening above or below them. It doesn't feel voyeuristic because they're only dark shadows; faint outlines of the real story behind the pacing. The thing I'm really worried about is – how much can they see of me?

Once this crosses my mind, I find myself 'performing' whenever I approach my window. Wondering who's watching for my faint outlines, and trying to create a drama to unfold. Putting on shoes, or sorting through books suddenly feels like my fifteen minutes of fame. The window panes that bring so much light to my room, now have a secondary meaning. They are not just a portal

out, but a look in. I am hyper-aware of what can be seen in the small space behind the glass. Each time I step into its spotlight, I seem to be trying to make my life something worth spying on. With my chin placed carefully on the ledge watching the sunset, I realise that I had created my own little window theatre – and that my behaviour by the window was as stiff and artificial as the Sylvanian Family hedgehogs posing as Montagues.

After being disappointed by my self-obsession, my mind repetitively chants that not everyone is as nosy as I am. Cursing myself, I go for a walk to check on the star-crossed lovers. Today shows a detailed account of the moment Romeo finds Juliet dead, and for some strange reason, I tear up, not at the figures, but at the hands that put them there. Picturing the time spent with their children, perfecting each scene. I am overwhelmed by the gentle tracing of the words, “Thus, with a kiss, I die.” It reminds me that the pleasure I found in the movements of the apartment silhouettes came from the beauty of catching someone when they’re fully themselves. The best moments happened when the pacing stopped and someone else joined them. They had no intention of breaching my privacy, because they were surrounded by loved ones, and that seemed to be enough.

Window Theatre made me realise that the miniature production my life has become is still as dramatic, loving, and moving as any on the big screen. I no longer peep at snippets of the lives of others, but look inwards at the four-cornered frame of my own. This frame is not a window or a stage but the four seats around my dinner table, each one representing a member of my family and a part of myself.

*Éle Ní Chonbhuí*

Dublin Unitarian Church



**Dublin Unitarian Book Club's  
choice for February 2021.**



## **Olive Kitteridge**

by

*Elizabeth Strout*

Olive Kitteridge lives in the picturesque coastal town of Crosby, Maine. This is small town America where supposedly nothing ever happens, yet, through thirteen short stories Elizabeth Strout describes a whole community who live through events and situations that are all part of life. Some of the book club readers found the stories very sad and grim as there are recurrent themes of loneliness, depression and suicide. But don't let that turn you off as there are also friendships, kindness and compassion and some great dialogue, especially from the droll and sarcastic Olive. There are very atmospheric descriptions of this coastal town bringing us through the seasons and years.

And so to Olive. She is a conundrum even unto herself. We meet her in the first story which is predominantly about her husband Henry Kitteridge, the local Pharmacist. Henry is an idealist and tends to see the world and people in a positive light. Olive on the other hand is a realist, doesn't suffer fools gladly and has no hesitation in saying so. Her son, Christopher, told her that she was the most feared teacher in the local High School where she taught Maths.

The thirteen stories span a time line of about thirty years and are not all about Olive, she weaves in and out of the ones about the other townsfolk of Crosby to a greater and lesser extent. There is the Piano Player, Angie O'Meara who plays in the local Hotel but can only perform in front of people when she is drunk, there's Harmon and Daisy who find friendship and love late in life, even though Harmon is married. They try help a young anorexic girl called Nina that they encounter with Olives help. There are the Larkins who have locked themselves away after their son murdered a woman, their only outings are to the prison to visit

him and then for groceries in the dark of night to the next town.

Through the stories we find out more about Olive and her character and come to some understanding as to why she is the way she is. It also takes Olive the thirty years to find out more about herself through some hard lessons and self-revelations and it is this growth of a person becoming more self-aware that is so interesting.

In the end Olive has become more tolerant and accepting of people and life without losing her very essence.

Olive, now a widow is asked by her new friend Jack Kennison, a recent widower “Give me a good reason to get up in the morning”? Olive replies “ Don’t have a clue, I’m waiting for the dog to die so I can shoot myself”. And that is Olive to a tea.

*Alison Claffey*

Dublin Unitarian Church

*There are a thousand ways*

*to kiss the ground*

Rumi

Unitarianism explores them all



Join us in our Exploration

Service every Sunday 11.00a.m.

[www.dublinunitarianchurch.org](http://www.dublinunitarianchurch.org)