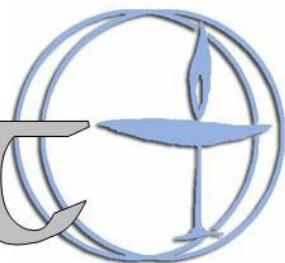


Oscailt



March 2023

IRELANDS UNITARIAN MAGAZINE

Vol.19 Nº 3



Annual General Meeting

Sunday 23rd April 2023

Notice

The *Congregational Annual General Meeting* will take place in the church after Sunday Service on Sunday 23rd of April 2023. The meeting agenda and related items will be included in the Annual Report which will be available to all Members one week prior to the AGM.

Voting Members may submit motions for inclusion on the AGM agenda and may nominate other Voting Member(s) for election to elected position(s).

Motions or nominations for submission should be sent in writing to the Secretary, Trish Webb Duffy, at The Unitarian Church 112 St. Stephen's Green Dublin D02 YP23

or at secretaryunitarianchurch@gmail.com

The closing date for the receipt of motions, nominations, and other items for inclusion on the AGM agenda is Sunday 12th March 2023.

Denise Dunne

Chairperson



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.

Oscailt is Published by the
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112 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin D02 YP23.

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Deadline

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The deadline for articles to be included in the next month is the 15th day of the month.



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 man's 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.

What is, is.

I recently celebrated my eightieth birthday, and with it came the realisation that wherever I thought I was going in life, I have arrived! Since my birthday, I find myself reflecting on the many twists and turns of my journey through life that have brought me to this point. I believe that each human life is not a single journey but a series of intertwined and interlocking journeys e.g., childhood, education, career, marriage, parenthood etc. etc. In addition, I believe that there is an ongoing spiritual thread underlying and permeating our life-journey. In the words of the Jesuit scientist and theologian, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin,

*“We are not human beings having a spiritual experience;
we are spiritual beings having a human experience.”*

I grew up in the Dublin Liberties in a typical Irish Catholic family. In the 1940s and 1950s the influence of the Irish Catholic Church on Irish society was pervasive and impacted on every aspect of social and political life. Obedience, clerical deference, and conformity to the teachings and moral strictures of the Catholic Church were the order of the day, and were widely accepted as such. From the Eucharistic Congress of 1932 up to the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1979 the Catholic Church in Ireland held a pre-eminent and, indeed, predominant role in Irish society. Conformity and strict attendance to one's spiritual duties e.g., weekly mass, confession etc, was taken for granted. Public displays and expressions of religious piety were everywhere. Grottos and shrines, were to be found in almost every town and village. Novenas, Triduum's, Parish Retreats and other devotional practices were the order of the day. I can vividly recall the monster Corpus Christi processions that were held annually throughout the country. Every street had house window shrines and celebratory buntings hung across every street including a famous, if theologically incorrect, banner strung across Meath Street in Dublin which read 'GOD BLESS THE SACRED HEART.' That was the spiritual environment of my youth.

I had, since 1950, been a member of a scout troop estab-

lished by the Franciscans Friars in Merchants Quay. As a young man I was attracted to the simplicity of the Franciscan way of life and, in 1965, I joined the Franciscan Order. This was at a time when seminaries were bursting at the seams. The Second Vatican Council had just concluded its deliberations and a whole new and exciting era beckoned for the Catholic Church. Or did it? Slowly, but surely, it became clear that apart from some cosmetic changes e.g., vernacular liturgy, there would be no fundamental change within the Catholic Church. Pope Paul dithered but Pope John Paul II embarked on an open policy of retrenchment. One of the early signs of a looming problem was the steady decline in vocations. Seminaries, which up to then had experienced continued expansion, were steadily emptying of seminarians (including myself) and the numbers of new entrants were reduced to a trickle. The visit of Pope John Paul II to Ireland in 1979 was heralded as a triumph which would consolidate the position of the Catholic Church in Ireland well into the future. In fact, as we now know, it was to be the prelude to its collapse as the Catholic Church in Ireland became overwhelmed by a tsunami of clerical abuse scandals, the consequences of which are still unfolding. But that's another story.

During my time with the Franciscans, I became very interested in the writings of the Jesuit anthropologist and philosopher, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and also in Celtic spirituality. De Chardin had developed a new vision of the universe and of the relationship of Christ to it. So advanced was his thinking that his writings were suppressed by the Jesuits at the behest of the Vatican and were only published by his academic friends after his death. I am particularly attracted to his vision of the nature and purpose of human life.

*"We are not the result of a long past single act of creation.
We are participants in an ongoing process of creation".*

From my studies of Celtic archaeology, I became aware of, and greatly interested in Celtic spirituality. I was drawn to the Celtic concept of the inter-relationship between the natural world and the supernatural.

Deep peace of the flowing air to you,

Deep peace of the whispering trees to you,

Deep peace of the morning mist to you,

Deep peace of the quiet earth to you,

*Deep peace of the Son of Peace to you,
And may He bring you home,
In the warm clasp of His hand.*

I became more and more detached from the theological dogmas and institutional strictures of the Catholic Church. I embraced the Celtic concept of the co-existence with this world of an “*otherworld*” where the spirits of our ancestors resided and also of the existence of “*thin places*” i.e., natural locations where the veil between this world and the “*otherworld*” is very thin. I have a number of ‘*thin places*’ to which I regularly retreat to reflect on the meaning and purpose of life. By the early 2000s I had withdrawn from all forms of organised religion. And then, circa 2008, I stumbled upon the Unitarian Church in St Stephen’s Green and was immediately attracted to its basic tenet of communal worship in a spirit of freedom, reason and tolerance. Since then, I have found in the Unitarian Church a spiritual home where I can develop my beliefs without having to conform to pre-determined dogmas and strictures. It is also a place where I can listen to and respect the diverse spiritual views of others.

So, where do I stand now? What are my spiritual beliefs?

Last year I had a significant medical episode which prompted me to focus on what I really believed in regard to this life, and the afterlife. This medical episode coincided with the launch of the James Webb Space Telescope. This telescope enables us to observe outer space to a depth and degree of clarity never possible before now. We know that our planet, Earth, is but one of billions of planets in our galaxy, the Milky Way, and that the Milky Way is but one of billions of galaxies in the cosmos. The cosmos is vast and complex. If there is an overarching structure and order to it, it is beyond our human comprehension. We can but gaze in “*awesome wonder*”. Efforts by humans to depict the supernatural are but feeble attempts to depict the undepictable.

Over the past year I have pondered on what do I really, deep down, believe. I was captivated and repeatedly drawn to a

simple phrase expressed by the French philosopher, Jacques Maritain, ***“What is, is”***. Essentially, it means that regardless of what opinions/views/beliefs individuals or religious groups may hold about the meaning and purpose of human life and of the cosmos, there is a reality to everything which exists in itself and is not dependant on what anyone believes. ***“What is, is”***. If we consider the spiritual beliefs of the myriad of religions in the world e.g., Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Shinto, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, etc, etc, all of them cannot be correct and there is the possibility that none of them are correct. I find myself drawn more and more to Maritain’s view that ***“What is, is”***. And so, in the twilight of my life, after a lifetime’s searching, I can visit my *“thin places”* unencumbered by predetermined theological dogmas or philosophical postulations and simply relax and reflect, surrounded by nature, in the knowledge and acceptance that

“What is, is”.

Frank Tracy
Dublin Unitarian Church

The People There to Catch Us

I've taken the title of the address today "The People There to Catch Us" from a documentary made last year. It, in part, tells the story of Tom Hope and Rachel O'Mahony, two cancer survivors who work alongside researchers at Precision Oncology Ireland, to help improve the lives of others living with the disease. The documentary was produced by Ronan Cassidy of Carbonated Comet and directed by Luke Brabazon under CÚRAM's 'Science on Screen' public engagement programme. It premiered at the Galway Film Fleadh in June last year and then was shown in the Stella Cinema here in Dublin on World Cancer day on September 24th. The documentary shines a light on the lived experience of cancer patients, their contribution to the research and the ongoing work of research centres like CÚRAM and Precision Oncology Ireland that will shape how cancer will be treated in the future. I'm a researcher in CÚRAM which is a Science Foundation Ireland – funded centre that aims to develop novel medical devices to treat a wide range of diseases from cancer to diabetes. There are over 650 funded researchers in CÚRAM and we range from oncologists to geneticists to bio-engineers to regulatory scientists all working together to bring these projects to a successful outcome. But this film is not just about the scientists involved in this work – it highlights the lived experience of the two cancer survivors Tom and Rachael and the role they play in working with us in our endeavours. We term this "public and patient involvement" PPI and PPI is built into all of our research projects. So what has this got to do with all of us sitting here today?

Well let me take you back to New Year's Day, I was sitting just there, at the favourite readings and Denis Aylmer read from John Donne's poem 'No Man is an Island'

No man is an island entire of itself; every man
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;
if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe
is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as
well as any manner of thy friends or of thine
own were; any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom

the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

It got me thinking.....”no man is an island entire of itself”. Logically that makes sense to me, we are all connected, and that we live our lives “ar scáth a chéile” ...in each other’s shadows. I’m sure many of you grew up in small towns, or villages or neighbourhoods and you really did live in each other’s shadows. You knew everyone and everyone knew you. And when I say they knew you, they knew everything about you – “your seed and breed” as my grandad used to say. I still live near the village I grew up in and my kids are fascinated that it can take me 20 minutes to walk 200 yards down the road to the shops because I stop and chat to so many people that I’ve known since my childhood on the way down the street and they just can’t believe that not only do I know so many of them, but I’m related to most of them one way or another.

I am of my village, my people are from here, have lived here, loved here, died and are buried here going back to 6, 7 or 8 generations.

I live about 3 miles from the village now in one of the thousands of carbon copy estates that ring our towns and cities. I’ve lived in this estate for half my life and yet I know only a handful of people in my cul de sac of 20 odd houses. Sure I’m on “waving hello from my car” terms with most of the neighbours and would be friends with a few, but I don’t even know the name of the woman whose house is less than 30 feet from mine and she’s probably lived there 10 years. Most of the time, if I’m working, I’m out of the estate by 7 and back late in the evening and I could go weeks, especially in the winter, without ever even bumping into a single one of my neighbours. There’s no living “ar scáth a chéile” here. We live in our boxy little houses and jump into our boxy little cars and zoom off to work or school or wherever and when we come home we head back in to our houses and do the same the next day and the next and the next.....”No man is an island entire of itself” as Denis read a few weeks ago – sometimes I feel that a lot of the way we live our lives is exactly that - as unconnected islands and I think the past few years of forced isolation due to COVID has only accentuated this.

We are seeing significant increases reported in poor mental health and development issues with children and teenagers. A June 2022 ESRI report produced in partnership with the Department of

Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth showed that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in poorer mental health among young adults. Using data from the Growing Up in Ireland COVID-19 survey, carried out in December 2020, the findings show that four-in-ten 22-year-old men and over half (55 per cent) of 22-year-old women were classified as depressed. These were much higher figures than two years previously when 22 per cent of men and 31 per cent of women were classified as depressed. Poorer mental health during the pandemic reflected the disruption to young adults' employment, education and day-to-day activities. And although this reports speaks to issues identified with young adults, these affects are mirrored across the whole population.

These figures are stark, the level of disconnectedness felt by our young people is huge and we can't just assume that post COVID this will resolve itself, it won't and we will all feel its affects for years to come. Anecdotally I see it in my own work as a lecturer and as a parent of young adults. When we transitioned back to face to face lectures last year, I had classes with students who had had almost all of their first two years of university life on-line. They were now physically in class with classmates whom they had only met virtually / on-line and we've all had to rethink our assumptions that things would just go back to how it was before. I know we can all use our phones as crutches in social situations we find awkward, but walking into a full lecture theatre or class that is totally silent because everyone is staring at their screen is really unnerving. Post-Covid our students have really struggled to engage in real life, to work in groups for assignments, to form friendships, to socialise, most have expressed a preference for at least some of their lectures continuing to be delivered remotely, College society memberships are down, students don't appear to want to spend as much time on campus.....I don't know about you, but for me the best part of school or college was that unstructured time hanging out in the students union or common room, but this isn't the lived experience now. And it's not just students and it's not just young people – more older people are reporting feeling lonely or experiencing social isolation and we know this is both a social and health issue. A 2019 report from TCD's longitudinal study on aging highlighted that social relationships are of fundamental importance as sources of support, reciprocity and wellbeing. The absence of these strong social supports in the form of loneliness and social isolation have been shown to be harmful to both physical and psychological wellbeing. Smaller social networks are also associated with



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UNITARIAN CHURCH

Prince's Street, Cork.

Registered Charity Number 0000246

Service: Sundays at 11a.m.

Minister: -Rev.Mike O'Sullivan Telephone:023-8842800

e-mail:- osullmike@gmail.com Mobile 087-9539998

Further information from 087-9539998

Treasurer : Brian Cluer e-mail: bmcleur@gmail.com

Secretary : Colm Noonan : e-mail : colm.noonan@gmail.com

www.unitarianchurchcork.com

Jazz Vespers, first Friday of the month @ 6pm.

An ecumenical service with the Methodist church.

Please Note

If you are aware of any member of our community who is unwell, or who has suffered a bereavement, and who would welcome contact from others in the church, please e-mail Rev.Bridget Spain.

Vestry 01 - 4780638

e-mail: revbspain@gmail.com

Childrens Programme - Sunday Club

Take place on the 2nd Sunday of each month

For any queries about Sunday Club, or to volunteer as a leader, please email
Denise at sundayclub@dublinunitarianchurch.org

DUBLIN UNITARIAN CHURCH

Lunch-time service every Wednesday from 1.10 to 1.40 p.m.

Each week Eileen Delaney sends an e-mail circular as to
what is happening in the church and
the other activities associated with the church.

If you would like to receive this information you should send
your details requesting your name be added to the list to:-
[**eileendelaney76@gmail.com**](mailto:eileendelaney76@gmail.com)



Dublin Unitarian Church

112 St. Stephens Green Dublin 2.

Service 11.00a.m.

Sunday Rota for March 2023

5th March

Service

Reader

Flowers

Welcomer

Coffee

The Right Rev. Lina Cockcroft Moderator of NSPCI

Jennifer Buller

Janet Mulroy

Janet Mulroy, Gavin Byrne

Janet Mulroy, Maeve Edwards, Gráinne Carty

12th March

Service

Reader

Flowers

Welcomer

Coffee

Limited Horizons

Rev. Bridget Spain

Paul Murray

Gráinne Carty

Tony Brady

Jane Nolan, Colette Fontana, Paula Mills

19th March

Service

Reader

Flowers

Welcomer

Coffee

Surrender

Rev. Bridget Spain

Bill Darlison

Rita O'Driscoll

Aidan O'Driscoll, Will O'Connell

Maeve Edwards, Michael Robinson, Tony Shine

26th March

Service

Reader

Flowers

Welcomer

Coffee

Entitlement

Rev. Bridget Spain

Aidan O'Driscoll

Frank Kelly

Michael Robinson

Frank Kelly, Lis Ramirez

Services are broadcast live from the church each Sunday at 11a.m.
On our WebCam, click and connect at www.dublinunitarianchurch.org

Recordings of previous services are also available on the 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.

DUBLIN UNITARIAN CHURCH

112 St.Stephen's Green, Dublin D02 YP23, Ireland.
Unitarian Church - Dublin Registered Charity Number 20000622

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

Managing committee:- Madam Chairperson: Denise Dunne;
Vice Chairman: Dennis Aylmer; Secretary: Trish Webb-Duffy; Treasurer: Rory Delany;
Tony Shine; Andy Pollak; Peter White; Will O'Connell;
Paul Murray; Madeline Stringer; Gavin Byrne; Tony Brady.

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Rev.Bill Darlison (*Minister Emeritus*)

Madam Chairperson: Denise Dunne:- Tel: 087-2450660

Secretary: Trish Webb-Duffy:- Tel: 087-9346720

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Organist: Josh Johnston Pianist 086 892 0602

Caretaker: Kevin Robinson Telephone: 4752781

Recordings of the church services are available on the church website.

early mortality, among older adults with or without limited everyday activities. Indeed, there is also an increasing body of research linking loneliness to an excess mortality risk which is comparable to that of smoking and obesity. Conversely, strong social ties have been shown to protect individuals' from emotional distress, cognitive decline, and physical disability.

So what are we going to do about this? What should we do about this? As an individual? As a community? I'm sure you're not going to be shocked when I say I don't really know. But I do know it's a conversation we need to have. We need to have it in our families, with our kids, with our friends and maybe even in this community.

This community/congregation does a really good job of being "the people there to catch us". When I was thinking about this address, I tried to think of all the ways people are those "people there to catch us" and I realised that there are probably hundreds of ways, both small and big that all those sitting here or at home listening do just that and maybe there are even more ways we can – this is definitively something to chat about over coffee after the service.

But talking about it isn't going to be enough. Let's get practical here – we know we need to gather people around us that are there to catch us – they may catch us when we are hit with the really big things in life like a cancer diagnosis or even when life is just a little grey and dreary or overwhelming or scary and we need to seek them out and hold them dear and this sentiment is echoed beautifully in the words of one of my favourite songs "white wine in the sun" by Tim Minchin when he tells his daughter that he and her family will always be there for her..... As he puts it:

*But you will learn someday
That wherever you are and whatever you face
These are the people who'll make you feel safe
In this world*

So let's look at some small practical things we can do to address issues of isolation and disconnectedness. In an address I took here a few years ago I spoke about how you might set about tackling a seemingly huge task and asked the question "how do you eat an elephant" and the answer is - one bite at a time. Seemingly small interactions that you have with other people can have huge impacts

for the good and I'm sure each of you can think of examples in your lives. In that previous address I mentioned I spoke about a really difficult time I was going through and standing at the school waiting to collect my kids and uncontrollable tears flowing down my face and a mam from the class who I didn't even know well loaded me and my kids in her car and brought me to her house and sat with me as I tried to get through this. She didn't ask me to explain, she just feed all the kids and let them watch some TV and sat me down with some tea and biscuits and gave me some space – she was there to catch me that day and I'll be forever grateful.

As I've already said the title of the address is taken from a documentary about all the people involved in helping and supporting you as you go through the diagnosis and treatment of cancer. It speaks to patients and their families, clinicians, researchers, nurses and time and time again the importance of personal interaction and connection during this process was highlighted. The one that struck me most was when Tom a person who had himself undergone cancer treatment discusses how he now is a volunteer that drives other people to their treatment. He speaks about how sometimes people just want to sit in silence with him as he drives them to and from the hospital, sometimes they just want to have a cry and sometimes they want to speak with him about what they and he have gone through, but he is there as a safe point of connection with them on this journey, one where it is far too easy to feel you are alone.

I'm not suggesting that this is something we need to all rush out and do, but I do think it would be a wonderful thing for us to sit with ourselves and see where we might have opportunities for connections, however small, that help to build up that network we all need. A network of small connections of people we share interests and passions with or bigger connections with friends and family members who are as Tim Minchin who I quoted above calls “the people who make you feel safe in the world”.

Bill Darlinson is very fond of quoting Robert Fulghum's “All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten” and if it is good enough for Bill, it is good enough for me!

“Without realizing it, we fill important places in each other's lives. It's that way with the guy at the corner grocery, the mechanic at the local garage, the family doctor, teachers, neighbors, coworkers. Good people who are always “there,” who can be relied upon in small,

important ways. People who teach us, bless us, encourage us, support us, uplift us in the dailiness of life. We never tell them. I don't know why, but we don't.

And, of course, we fill that role ourselves. There are those who depend on us, watch us, learn from us, take from us. And we never know.

You may never have proof of your importance, but you are more important than you think. There are always those who couldn't do without you. The rub is that you don't always know who."

So perhaps today or some time this week it might be good to sit and have a think about those micro-networks which we are part of or want to be part of. Think about what more we can do, or what we can do differently? Is there something we feel passionate about? A cause? A hobby? It really doesn't matter – find a way of using this to establish, re-establish or strengthen YOUR network. It doesn't have to be any huge big step or gesture and hopefully it will benefit you and all those you reach out to.

To finish up I'd like to repeat the opening words from today's service

"We gather as many drops, each winding our own path down life's surfaces and ruts. Here we pool together as a single body, flowing together for a time. Together we are a stream, at times even a river, for with our shared force we can travel toward oceans of meaning and seas of connection."

Let us pool together when we can and travel a while in each other's company, lifting each other up and keeping those connections going and reaching out to or even being the people there to catch those of us who need catching.

Elaine Harris

Dublin Unitarian Church

Unitarian Music Society

A Fun Weekend on 11th – 14th August 2023

Now that we are starting to enjoy travelling again, after the 2-3 years locked into our houses, I thought it would be a nice time to remind our congregation and friends about the Unitarian Music Society, a collective of church musicians and like-minded individuals who meet at the Nightingale Centre in Derbyshire for a long weekend in August to think and talk about music, and play quite a lot of it too – although the latter is optional, most people get stuck in as well either playing an instrument or singing. It's a beautiful location too affording the opportunity for magnificent walks in the Peak District if all the music gets too much. On Sunday morning, we convene at the local chapel for worship and all meals are taken together, allowing everybody a great chance to meet old friends and new. If you enjoy music – creating or listening – at any level and at any age, this might be a perfect break for you.

More information and booking details from me or email margaretrobinson81@gmail.com – she's the secretary of the society.

Josh

Spirit of Life

On Sunday 29th of January the Rev. Bridget Spain in her capacity as Moderator of the synod of Munster travelled to Cork to dedicate and bless the churches new “Spirit of Life” chapel which was completed and opened for worship last April. In addition to her role as Moderator this was a very special invitation for Rev.Bridget who for ten years was minister in charge of the Prince’s Street Cork and who had many years ago suggested the creation of a dedicated worship space in its now present location, so, this was for her, the realisation of a dream, as she remarked during her welcome; “it’s nice to be right!”.

A packed chapel was led in the service by Rev.Bridget who was assisted by the minister of Cork Rev.Mike O’Sullivan. Readings were read by Colm Noonan who read from Eusabius a bishop of the early church and Teresa Goggin who read “*The Central Task of the Religious Community*” by Mark Morrison Reed a now retired Unitarian minister. Chair of the church Committee Neal Dunnigan thanked all present, our guests and those who had travelled to be with us.

Music was provided by Corks resident worship musician Pearse O’Donohue who also ended the service with a bluesy and soulful version of “Amazing Grace” and by Doreen Groocrock who played a flute solo after the homily. The service was broadcast live on social media with camera work and sound handled by Murty Kelleher.

For the service we were joined by ecumenical guests; Rev. Andrew Robinson from Cork Methodist churches, Rev.Meagan Farr and Jer O’Sullivan from the nearby Church of Ireland parish in Shandon and by Catherine Sanborn from the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) as well as Dennis Aylmer from our Dublin church who is our lay representative at synod and a trustee of our building and Pamela McCarthy long-time friend of the Cork church.

In her welcome Rev.Bridget spoke of our differences which are of course dear to each tradition but remarked that “we can gather under one roof with one unified spirit to worship the

One God". In this spirit she led the congregation in saying an adapted and modern version of the Lord's prayer written by Fred Keip a Unitarian minister.

In her sermon Rev Bridget reflected on the changing role of church pointing out that "people still feel the longing for connection with their soul, and they need to find a community as they make their journey of connection" while also acknowledging that "covid has changed how everyone attends church" and "all churches are being challenged right now". And asserting her belief that "we need the presence of a liberal faith group in the community. Modern society is not interested in dogma, it attaches no importance to creeds and theologies that were formulated in ancient times".

In her words of dedication, she reflected the ethos of our faith; "May all be welcome here without question, may this chapel reveal the God of many names and understandings who finds expression in the wonderful diversity of humanity".

At the conclusion of the service refreshments provided by Teresa Goggin and Kay O'Sullivan were enjoyed by the congregation and its guests. We would like to thank all who attended, the many who joined us online and most of all, Rev.Bridget for her continued friendship and support of the Cork church and its work. (*see front cover pictures*)

Rev.Mike O'Sullivan

Unitarian Church Cork. Minster and Committee

Dublin Unitarian Book Club's choice for January 2023.

Grey Bees *by* **Andrey Kurkov**

This book was written in 2018 about the grey zone on the frontline between the Ukrainian troops and the Russian Separatists who are fighting in the breakaway people's republics of Donesk and Luhansk.

Our protagonist is Sergey Sergeyich, an ordinary everyday man living in the small village of little Starhorodivka situated in the 'grey zone'.

The village is deserted except for two remaining inhabitants. Sergey, who retired on disability grounds and Pashka, Sergey's old school rival who is now his 'frenemy'.

They are on opposite sides of this conflict, Pashka supporting the Russian separatists whom he fraternises with for free vodka and food scraps, while Sergey supports the Ukrainian military. Sergey befriends a Ukrainian soldier, Petro, who not only charges his mobile phone as there has been no electricity in Starhorodivka for three years but he also gives him a grenade. One drunken night Sergey hides the grenade, but subsequently cannot remember where he put it!

Sergey and Pashka grudgingly look out for each other and their conversations are charged with their old rivalry but are also very entertaining and touching because of their isolation. They share vodka, food if they have it, and they light their homes with a large supply of the church candles they took from the abandoned church. Sergey was married but his wife Vitalina has left him with their daughter. The village was too insular and 'grey' for her so she left for the city of Vinnytsia. His one concern now is his six bee hives and his bees. As spring approaches he worries that there will not be enough pollen for them to collect and that they are being disturbed by the shelling and bombardments they can hear in the distance. He decides to leave with his bees and to bring them to where they can collect their pollen in peace. He loads up his ancient green Lada which still has Russian number plates from the old days and a trailer with his bee hives and sets off for the Crimea to reconnect with another bee keeper, Akhtem, whom he met at a bee convention twenty years previously. He says goodbye to Pashka who asks him to not to forget to return.

On Sergey's journey he is always under suspicion as a man from Donbas with Russian number plates, people try to pin him down with his allegiances but he always tries to remain neutral by saying he is from the 'Grey Zone'.

He stops at a place called Vesele where he sets up camp and sells some of his honey to the local shopkeeper, Galya. They become good friends and eventually involved, reluctantly on Sergey's part. All is peaceful here except for some men who mope around the bus stop drinking. They are suspicious of Sergey and one of them, a returned soldier with PTSD attacks Sergey's car breaking the windows and also damages one of his hives. There is another incident where Sergey does not follow the local custom of kneeling as a funeral procession of another returned soldier passes by. There is no escaping the war and so Sergey has to move on and so resumes his journey to the Crimea.

There is always a sense of menace in the air especially at military checkpoints and at the Russian border control at the Crimea where he is told he can only stay ninety days.

Eventually he arrives at Akhtem's village and finds out from his wife Aisylu that he has been missing for nearly two years. Akhmed and his family are Muslim Tatars and by telling us of their experience under the new Russian Authorities we see how human rights violations are meted out and tolerated by the locals as they swallow the Kremlin's propaganda of the land being 'Russian Orthodox since time immemorial'.

Sergey sets up camp with his bee hives next to Akhtem's hives. Aisylu, her son Bekir and daughter Aisha along with Sergey look after the hives and harvest the honey. They become friends and help each other, one time Sergey anonymously leaves some of his church candles at their house during a power cut. Unfortunately, during a police raid the candles are discovered and Bekir is arrested for the theft of sacred Orthodox church candles. When Sergey finds out he goes to the police who are bewildered that he would care about a Muslim Tatar and regardless of his innocence of the theft, the authorities find another crime to charge Bekir with as he is guilty of driving his father's car without his permission, even if he has been missing for two years. The only options for Bekir is prison or to join the army.

Aisylu also asks Sergey to make enquiries about Akhtem. He faces a dilemma as he does not want to come to the attention of the authorities. No matter what he cannot remain neutral in this war and agrees to go. Following his visit and enquiries to the police Akhtem's body is discovered buried in the forest and is returned to his wife and community for burial. Sergey asks if he can come to the funeral and the Imam gives him permis-

sion. Here Sergey sees the cultural differences between the Tatars and the other Crimeans. Kurkov is very respectful in describing the wake and funeral and mourning period as seen through the eyes of Sergey. Following Bekir's arrest and Akhtem's funeral Aisylu is fearful for Aisha and asks Sergey to help her get her out of Crimea into Ukraine. Sergey contacts his ex wife Vitalina who agrees to help Aisha, he will take her across the border and put her on a bus to Vinnytsia , again Sergey cannot remain forever in the neutral 'grey zone'. Before his ninety days are up the Authorities confiscate one of Sergey's beehives and return it with only days to spare. Sergey inspects the hive and thinks that the bees look grey and their behaviour has changed. He suspects they have been infected and worries that they will infect the rest of his bees and also of all of Ukraine's bees. He is now across the border in Ukraine and following a disturbed nights sleep camping in a field he inspects his hives whereupon he discovers the lost grenade in one of them. So that's where he hid it! He takes the drastic action of blowing up the infected beehive, the symbolism is not lost on the reader. He then calls Pashka to say he is on his way home. Pashka who never misses a chance asks him to bring cigarettes but to hide them well. Sergey says he will hide them with his bees. Pashka says he will be waiting for him and Sergey says at least someone is waiting for him as he presses on the accelerator to head home. The book club readers enjoyed this book and would recommend it especially in light of the war now happening in Ukraine.

Alison Claffey

Dublin Unitarian Church

Plant Sale in May 2023

