

Your first time at a Unitarian Service? What to expect...

your **first time** at a Unitarian service

If you are attending a Unitarian service for the first time, you might be in a building that looks very much like a traditional church, with pews, a pulpit and an organ, or you might be in a modern multi-purpose structure that can be adapted to many different uses. Unitarians have a long and varied history, which means that their buildings do not conform to a single, prescribed fashion or style. Some Unitarians hold services in Quaker meeting-houses, while some fellowship groups meet in members' homes.

You might find that the person officiating at the service is a professionally-trained minister, lay leader, or ordinary member of the congregation. Unitarians believe in 'the priesthood of all believers,' and maintain that no special authority enables one to conduct worship.

You will find women and men sharing tasks equally, including the conduct of worship. The Unitarians were the first denomination in Great Britain to welcome women into the professional ministry, in 1904.

Unitarian congregations are independent and can determine their own form of worship. The service might follow traditional Protestant lines with hymns, prayers, readings and a sermon/address. It could be less formal than usual church services, with a group discussion serving as the focal point. There is no need to worry about when to sit or stand, as the person leading the service will clearly indicate what is appropriate, and when.

unity through diversity

NORCLIFFE CHAPEL, STYAL



Readings are often taken from the Jewish and Christian scriptures, with an additional passage from a non-biblical source. However, some Unitarian groups rarely choose to read from the Bible. All writings that reflect upon the human condition, our relationships with God and with the natural world, are deemed worthy of study and reflection. Unitarians acknowledge their roots in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, but feel that religious truth is not limited to a specific collection of writings. This breadth of interest is reflected in the content of the service, which is intended not to indoctrinate, but to encourage each person to think for herself or himself.

You might discover that people whom you meet hold very different theological opinions. Unitarians are united by a common quest for truth and justice from a liberal religious perspective. No subscription to creeds or teachings is required for membership.

You might find the symbol of a flaming chalice embroidered over the pulpit fall or painted on the wall. In many churches, a chalice is lit at the beginning of the service and extinguished at the end. The symbol has come to represent the Unitarian search for truth and the value of sacrificial love.

how we **worship**

Prayer

Most Unitarian congregations say or sing the prayer of Jesus in unison. Some choose to include it in services occasionally or not at all. 'Prayer' is not limited to formal and traditional practices. A person leading worship will often invite the congregation to enter into a time of contemplation, meditation or reflection. Persons are free to discover which method of focusing their thoughts and feelings is most appropriate for them.

Silence

Most Unitarians place great value on silence in worship. Time is often set aside for peace and quiet at some point in the service, most commonly after a long prayer/meditation.

Music

Unitarians feel that music can be equally as effective as words in creating a sense of wonder, inspiration and discovery. Many churches have a rich tradition of vocal and instrumental music. Some may use the facility of a CD player.

“THERE ARE NO RESTRICTIONS ON ATTENDANCE OR FULL PARTICIPATION. ALL ARE WELCOME REGARDLESS OF DENOMINATIONAL AFFILIATION.”

unitarians in community...

The Collection Each church has its own customs for receiving money during the service. Some pass plates, pouches or boxes during a musical offering. Some churches have a retiring collection, so that persons may leave a contribution in a bowl whilst leaving the building. Some do not have a collection at all!

Communion Communion is celebrated in very few Unitarian churches in Great Britain. If communion is offered, it is usually held as a short service immediately after the main worship gathering. There are no restrictions on attendance or full participation. All are welcome regardless of denominational affiliation. One need not be baptised or confirmed in any tradition. It is a simple memorial meal in which the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth are remembered, and the fellowship of the congregation is symbolically celebrated.

Rites of Passage Unitarians believe that special services which are held to mark significant stages in the life of an individual should be as relevant and unique to the participants as possible. This means that the rites of passage are not rigidly fixed, but are prepared in consultation with the persons who are directly involved. Child namings, weddings, services of blessing and other occasions are commonly celebrated. Ministers and lay leaders are normally happy to officiate at such ceremonies for non-members.

ST MARK'S UNITARIAN CHURCH, EDINBURGH



Unitarians enjoy listening to the opinions of others, so let someone know your impressions after the service! The minister or leader, or church members would be pleased to answer any questions you might have.



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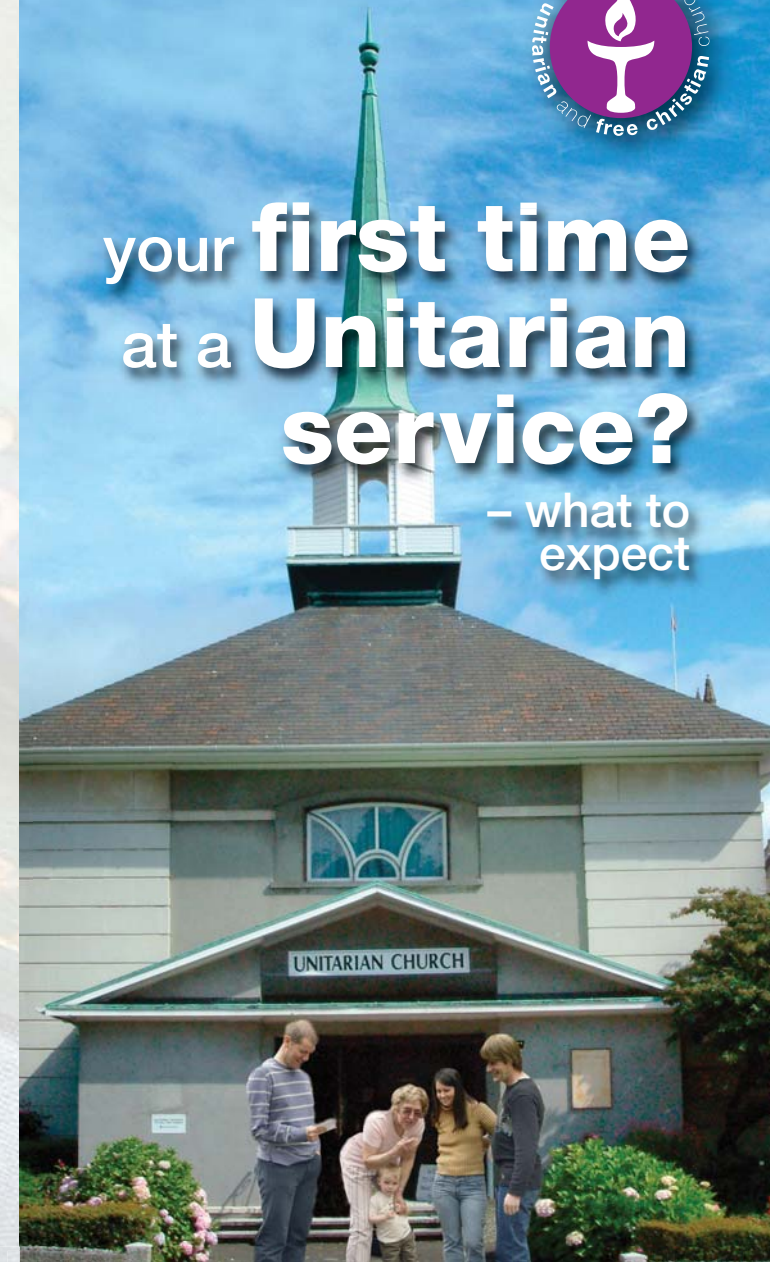
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BRADFORD UNITARIAN CENTRE



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a unitarian information leaflet