



Glasgow Unitarians

February 2026

News & Views

In memory of Reverend John Clifford

*An honest man here lies at rest,
The friend of man, the friend of truth,
The friend of age, and guide of youth:
Few hearts like his, with virtue warm'd,
Few heads with knowledge so inform'd;
If there's another world, he lives in bliss;
If there is none, he made the best of this.
Robert Burns*

Programme & Notices

February 2026

Sunday 1 February - 11.00 in Church and on Zoom. Live streaming from Edinburgh Unitarians

Sunday 1 February - 7.00pm on Zoom Reverend Kate Dean - Wheel of the Year festival, Imbolc Pagan Gathering

Sunday 8 February - 11.00 in Church and on Zoom. Donald and Ruth Jacobs - Reflection on Two Lives in conversation with Alison Spurway

Sunday 15 February - 11.00 in Church and on Zoom. Jim Millar Reflections on a Life so far

Sunday 22 February - 11.00 in Church and on Zoom. The Scout and Guide Associations - a Unitarian Movement

March 2026

Sunday 1 March - 11.00 in Church and on Zoom. Live streaming from Dundee

Sunday 1 March - 7.00pm Zoom Ali Briggs. - Christian Nationalism



Following the sudden death of our dear Minister Emeritus, Reverend John Clifford we dedicate this edition of News & Views to John. Our thoughts are with Barbara and her family at this difficult time, as we rally round in support, while taking stock, and time, to acknowledge our own grief and our fond memories of John. My thanks to Donald, who emailed round many of our Unitarian friends. **AJB**

In your own Words- Tributes to John

Lyanne Mitchell

As a new member of GUC, more than 40 years ago, I was lucky enough to have John as my first Unitarian minister. His sermons were always thought provoking, topical and inspiring. It was no surprise when he became a key person within our whole movement, respected by all.

He will be sorely missed by Glasgow and Edinburgh Unitarians and so many more. He was a very special person with many talents. I count myself very lucky to have known him.

My deepest sympathy goes out to Barbara and all the family.

George Paxton

John was an internationalist. Born in the United States and training there as a Unitarian-Universalist minister, he settled in Scotland as an adult and became a British citizen. Later he worked in Germany for the International Association for Religious Freedom and then in Japan. In later years, he and Barbara visited India and parts of

Africa.

John was also greatly concerned with peace issues and while in Scotland involved himself in the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an organisation founded after the First World War. During the later days of the 'Troubles' in Ireland he took a close interest in developments and met some of the active campaigners for peace there.



Jim Millar

John Clifford was a good man, a family man. A quiet man for sure but a deep thinker and of high intellect. Passionate in his beliefs but who always had time for others and a man who always cut a dashing figure in his kilt!

Donald Jacobs

I'm shocked and sad we have lost our friend Rev. John Clifford so suddenly and far too soon. I'm going to miss John a lot. He shared so many interesting things from his experiences, about the Unitarian movement, and his gathered wisdom on life. For me, it is very sad to think there will be no more of these conversations. More than that, John really wanted me to do well, a trait as endearing as it is rare.



For example, he advised me to lose weight, earnestly, for my own good. Rarer still, he laughed at my jokes. Not having John around any more is such a great loss, as I am sure everyone who knew him will feel, yet as he would surely say, it is better to dwell with appreciation on the times that have been.

Ruth Gregory

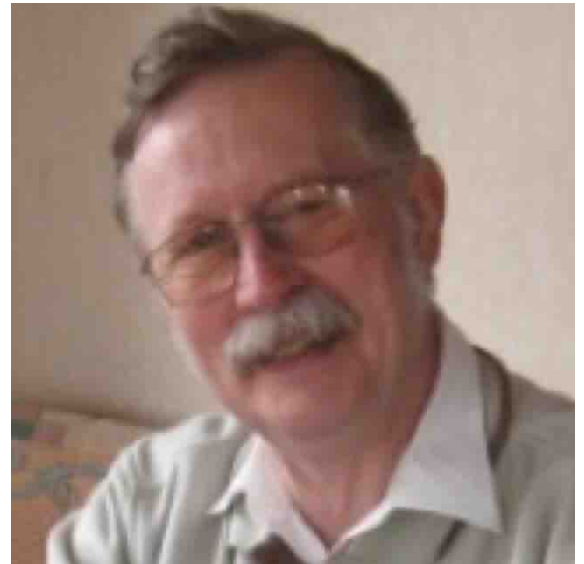
I feel lucky to have known John. His was a shining example of duty and commitment to the Glasgow Unitarian Church, to his family and to the Unitarian movement in the UK.

Of course, I met John at committee meetings and on Sundays, but the first time I had any closer connection was when I undertook the first stage of the worship leader courses, which he ran in Edinburgh. Helpful and encouraging, careful to point out the necessary features of a good service. It wasn't difficult to appreciate that here was a real professional.

Personally, I always felt that John's services were thought-provoking and helpfully calming.

A year or so before he died, Bill, my husband, asked John if he would officiate at his funeral when the time came. John willingly agreed, and produced a service which was sensitive and comforting, with lovely readings.

John and Barbara were very supportive and kind to me afterwards, visiting me in hospital when I hurt my back, and coming down to West Kilbride to visit.



More recently, I have been attending the Wednesday evening discussion group, where we have tackled many issues concerning the environment and other huge problems facing, or dividing our world today. Meanwhile, John tried to keep us focused on our Unitarian values when considering possible solutions and his widespread knowledge, and experience of life were invaluable.

Lucky us..... John so well deserved to be our Minister Emeritus.

Margaret and George Paxton

We first met John when he was minister of the Unitarian church in Dundee. He had his very young children, Callum and Naomi and wife Gay there with him. There were occasions when members from Glasgow church and Dundee church met for meetings. John was young and we too were young with our children in those days. So, we and others in the church were already known to John when in 1975 he arrived to be minister to the Glasgow Congregation at the Building in St Vincent Street. John was good with children and took them on outings even down to Hucklow, in Derbyshire. At our request John gave a series of weekly lessons on Unitarianism to the children in the church. John conducted the wedding of our daughter Ruth and her husband John in the Berkeley Street building in 1992, although he was working at that time in the Unitarian Headquarters in Essex Hall, London. John, at 86 years old, was about to conduct the wedding of their daughter in March this year but that, sadly, was not to be.



John was a friend to many. Many felt they owned a bit of John. His death was such a tragic accident at home, but his life was happy with Barbara, his wife and they both helped keep the congregation at Glasgow together and alive right up to his sudden death after the Service on 18 January 2026.

Ruth Paxton Wright

The first memory I have of John Clifford is when he took all the children of the church to Hucklow I must have been about 11 years old. I remember clearly my friend Angela who was not associated with the church, and I were very excited because we got to stay up late to travel in the minibus on the motorway all the way down to England. I also remember John Clifford teaching the children in the church in the 70's and we used to put on wee plays from the bible which I really enjoyed. In 1992 John Clifford married my husband John and me, we were the first to be married in the new church building. I moved to Aberfoyle and lost touch with many people in the church for a long time but started coming back during the Pandemic on Zoom and I was so pleased to see a lot of the congregation I remembered especially John Clifford as he was one of the main people I associated with the Glasgow church. It was lovely reconnecting with John and Barbara again.



Ali Briggs

Like Ruth Paxton Wright, I first met John in 1975, as the new Minister in Glasgow. I was also about 11 years old, just a few months younger than Ruth. Since then, despite being away from the Church for many years, I always considered John to be part of my life.

When I was about 12, John took us on our first cycling holiday. Looking back, I have nothing but admiration for a man who could take several teenage girls on holiday and maintain his equilibrium. I think there was only once that he raised his voice in annoyance.

It was on the first of these holidays that I first met Irene, John's older daughter, Irene. The cycling holidays were a chance for her to see more of Scotland and to meet and spend time with other girls of a similar age. Naomi and Calumn were still very young at the time.



circa 1982, John at Susan's wedding



When I returned to the community at Glasgow Unitarian Church in 2018, I found John's presence to be a real comfort.

His sudden death has hit us all hard. I had spoken to him earlier in the day on the 18th and he was feeling good. Eyesight better than expected and no stick!

These are a few of the little things I remember about John, which I hope will bring back good memories; his kilt, his wildcat sporran, the bagpipes, the cycling holidays, his understanding of technology at an

age when many are concerned it is all a 'step too far', his thoughts on US and UK politics. One I didn't witness but the spoke of serenading Barbara on a gondola in Venice. All these things were part of the man I knew.

Recently, John mentioned that he hoped the Hymn 'Let it Be a Dance,' be played at his funeral. It may be, but even if it isn't, it will always remind me of the Reverend John Clifford, Minister Emeritus at Glasgow Unitarian Church and his dedication and joy of life.

Ps. I forgot until I read Donald's words, his taste in humour was very similar to Donald's, never unkind, never rude, but still funny.

My thoughts are with Barbara and her loss. I look forward to seeing her returning to the Church when she is ready.

*Let it be a dance we do.
May I have this dance with you?
through the good times and the bad times too,
Let it be a dance.*

Linda Haggerston

John, may he rest in blessed peace.

Last year, 2025, I had the pleasure of walking with John for Glasgow Pride Mardi Gla. It was a real honour to be there with him and Alison, representing Unitarians and knowing that we were supporting my community together. His presence as an ally meant a lot to me.

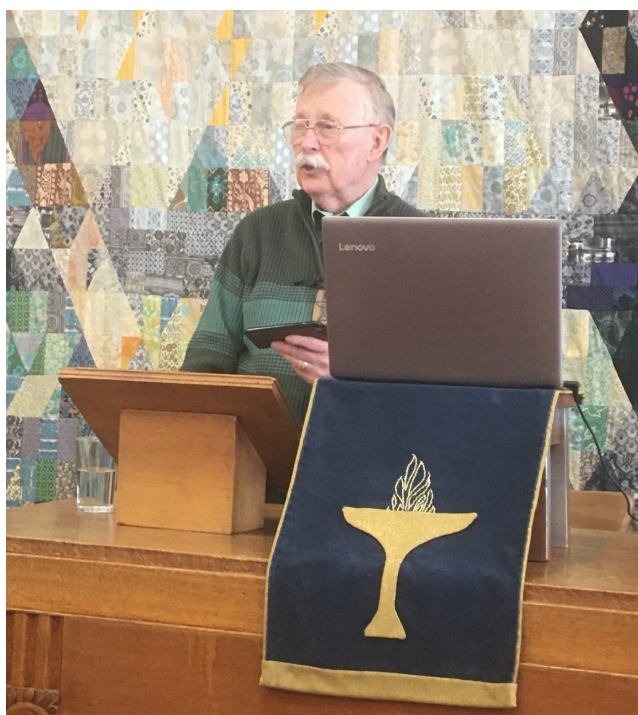
Before Pride, I hadn't seen John in a long time. I remember how patient he was with me, many years ago now, when I was studying to be a worship leader, and he provided feedback.

I wanted to train as a Unitarian minister, and even though I didn't get accepted, I know somehow that John would probably have supported my efforts. Like night and day in our approaches to ministry, I still found his knowledge and calm demeanour reassuring and inspiring. When I left the church in 2012, he and Barbara were two folks I truly missed.



Jan Barnes

I was so shocked to hear your terrible news via George about John Clifford. I'm sure everyone in the Unitarian family is feeling much the same. What a great loss he will be to you all as it's always felt that John had been there for ever. A lovely man with so many interests but the welfare of the Glasgow Unitarian congregation always dear to his heart. Please send my love and thoughts to Barbara and his children Naomi and Calum and let them know that they are all very much in my thoughts and prayers.



I cannot remember the year I first came to the Glasgow Unitarians, but it was somewhere around 1974 or 5 when the church was still in Saint Vincent Street, with the ladies with the lamps adorning the walls.

John made me feel very welcome and introduced me to all the wonderful people in the congregation nearly all sadly no longer with us and I remember them all very fondly.

John at that time was a relatively new as minister and I joined others relatively new to the congregation Lyanne and her parents, Barbara, and her family.

We were surrounded by many members whose involvement stretched back a very long way to the time when the church was very different to how it is today. I loved listening to the stories of Chris Cunningham, Isobel Coventry. Mr and Mrs Dand, Harry Wylie, Florence Stark and Wilma Paterson and her dad. Of course, there were many others but those are the ones I remember most and of course George and Margaret Paxton who are thankfully still with us.

John was different and not quite as in the mould of the traditional Unitarian minister, if there ever was one, and in some ways at that time there was a slight tension but being good tolerant Unitarians, we soon adjusted to his way of doing things. It must have been challenging for him too coming from a different culture, a different country, but then Glasgow by its nature always eventually welcomes the stranger and takes welcomes them in. This was how it was with John who went away for a while but then came back and has given so much to the Church until now, with Barbara at his side.

John will be remembered in my family as the man in the kilt who arrived on his bike to share long conversations over the kitchen table and who fasted one day a week. He brought much colour to the West End and will be remembered as a good friend and a family man who loved his children.

I'm sure he will be fondly remembered with much love by all his Glasgow friends and many others far and wide.

Rev. Janine Sim

I was so sad and shocked to hear about John. I can't begin to imagine how you, and all who love him, are feeling, but I wanted to reach out and send my love and support — both practically and pastorally.

John and Barbara hold such a special place in my heart. They have been so welcoming and encouraging with my move here, and as part of the St Mark's family he was deeply loved and respected. Please know that the community is holding you all in love and care.

Sending you so much love,

Janine has offered her services for anyone who would wish to contact her for support following the news. I passed her phone number to members of Glasgow Unitarian Church. If anyone would like a reminder, or has not received the email, please contact me at:

churchofficer@glasgowunitarians-sci.org.uk

Margery MacKay

I had heard about John's sad death and was deeply shocked and saddened.

It must be a terrible shock for the whole congregation. It was so lovely to have seen John and Barbara at Janine's welcoming celebration on the Saturday, which made the shock even greater.

I send my love and condolences to you all.



Simon Bland

It has been such shocking and sad news; I was in the pew along from John on Saturday at Edinburgh and was so saddened to hear this news.

Our thoughts and prayers are with Barbara and the congregation.

Very Best wishes at such a difficult time

Tony McNeile

That is sad news. I have known John for many years. He is part of the Unitarian DNA.

Love to Barbara



Jeff Teagle,

I worked closely with John from 1994 when I commenced as Unitarian General Secretary until John's retirement in 2023. John had become Deputy General Secretary from 1990, having become the GA's Information Officer the previous year.

John was a person of many talents with great dedication to the Unitarian and Universalist cause.

John grew up in California and later undertook his theological training at Brown University, Rhode Island,

qualifying to become a minister in fellowship with the Unitarian Universalist Association.

His interest in Scottish country dancing and bagpipes brought him to the UK in 1970 and subsequently to two Scottish ministries from 1973-1983. Throughout his time with the General Assembly, John maintained a flat in Edinburgh and would take the overnight bus on a Friday evening to spend the weekend there.

John was an internationalist at heart and went to Frankfurt to the then HQ of the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) from 1985-1988, working with Dieter Gherman, its chief executive. The Unitarian General Assembly was a founding member of the IARF. John maintained an on-going involvement in the IARF on a volunteer basis throughout his time of working with the GA and played a key role at organising its Congress meetings in different parts of the world. John was highly regarded in IARF circles, bringing valuable organisational skills.



As Deputy General Secretary, John brought those skills of detailed organisation to the smooth running of Essex Hall premises, the GA Annual Meetings, GA Council Meetings, and similar administrative duties.

With the introduction of computers, John took the trouble to undertake a computer studies course that was to become particularly important as the technology was introduced in Unitarian HQ. When I first commenced, it was John who thoughtfully created a most useful induction programme that enabled me to get quickly into gear.

John was a unique personality with strong beliefs, tempered by great humanity and not afraid to be his own man. His dedication to wearing a kilt with a bespoke Clifford tartan in the Strand, London was manifest proof of his sense of identity. For this, and for many other reasons, I will remember him with affection and respect.

Liz Slade

I was so sorry to hear of John's death - the Glasgow congregation must be in shock. Please do pass on our good wishes from the GA.

One thing that I would add from his time as GA President is the 2015 annual report - the points he makes are very pertinent today
<https://www.unitarian.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/AnnReport15-final.pdf>

The other major thing that struck me about John was that he made stern warnings about the ethics of Facebook long before the rest of us realised just how bad it can be. I suspect that he was ahead of the curve on a good many things.

In time, please do let us know if we can be of any support as the congregation regroups - the loss of a big character can be quite destabilising in unexpected ways. We're always happy to help or just listen.



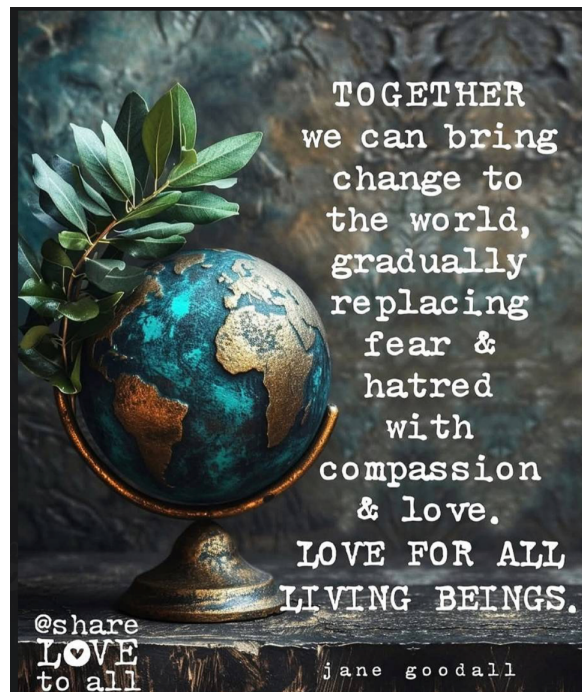
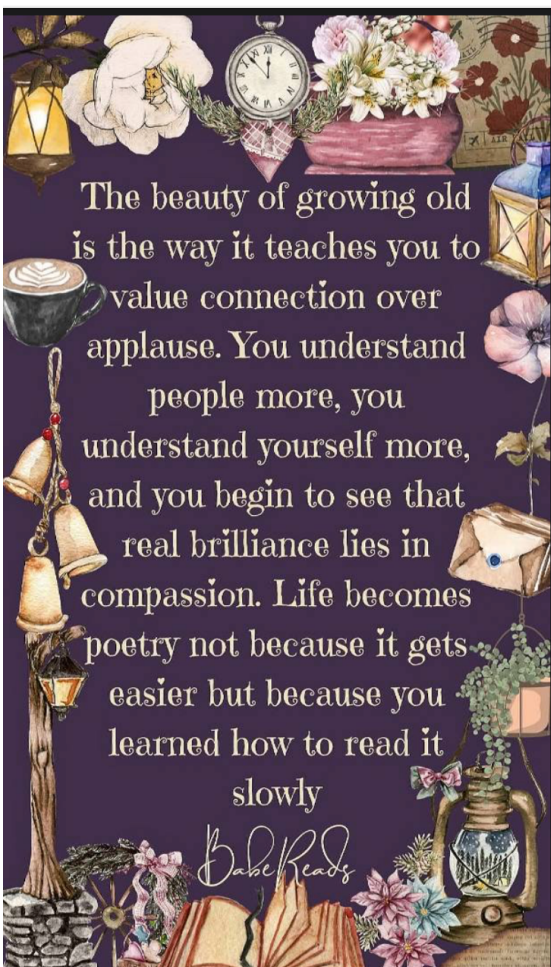
Audrey Longhurst

I was so sorry to hear of the death of John on Sunday, 18th January 2026 - indeed, a devastating time for his surviving wife Barbara and John's family.

John held a number of prominent positions in the wider UK Unitarian Movement, including being GA President 2015-2016.

Minister: Avon Group 1970-1973; Dundee 1973-1975; Glasgow 1975-1983; Wiesbaden UU Fellowship PO 1985-1988, SE Wales Group; Aberdare, Cardiff and Cefn Coed 2003-2004

Other: International Association for Religious Freedom Secretariat 1985-1988; GA Information Officer 1989-1990, GA Deputy General Secretary 1990-2003; Hon Associate Minister, St Marks Edinburgh 1992-2007; Executive Secretary, International Council of Unitarians, and Universalists 2005-2009; General Assembly President 2015-2016; Minister Emeritus, Glasgow 2016-2026.



Memes supplied by John for inclusion n News & Views