



## **Eastern Union of Unitarian & Free Christian Churches**

### **Annual Newsletter November 2011**

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#### **Editorial**

Welcome to the Eastern Union Annual Newsletter. It contains the reports given by congregations to the Annual General Meeting held on 24 September 2011 at Bury St Edmunds Meeting House. We hope you will enjoy reading them. The AGM was followed by a public lecture by Unitarian historian Alan Ruston, who delivered an informative and sometimes light-hearted look at our predecessors, the Dissenters, who in 1711 built the Meeting House. The text has been posted on the EU's website.

Earlier in the year, on 12 March, we were delighted to have with us at our Development Day Catherine Robinson, the Pulpit Secretary of the Manchester College Chapel Society Meeting (holds weekly Sunday services in Oxford), to discuss with us the practicalities and challenges of being a congregation without a minister. Those EU congregations with a minister picked up tips on managing 'supply' service leaders.

On a warm sunny Sunday evening of 8 May well-wishers from throughout East Anglia and Essex gathered at Framlingham for a service to celebrate the beautiful restoration of the Meeting House. Ray and Sheila Seal had played a big part in the restoration. It was with sadness that we noted Ray's retirement from the Lay Pastorship at the end of June, but we thank him very much for all he did in that post and for his chairmanship of the Eastern Union. We wish Ray and Sheila a happy future.

The Summer Meeting took place on a very warm sunny afternoon on Sunday 26 June when the Gt Yarmouth congregation welcomed us to a service led by the General Assembly President, Rev. Dr Ann Peart, on the theme 'Communities of Memory and Hope'. This was followed by a splendid tea provided by the Gt Yarmouth congregation with assistance from the Norwich Octagon congregation.

The events for 2012 are listed at the end of the Newsletter. We hope to see many of you at one or more of them.

Shirley Fieldhouse  
Secretary  
Eastern Union of Unitarian & Free Christian Churches

## Being a Dissenter in 1711

by Alan Ruston

Text of a lecture given by Alan Ruston at the Bury St Edmunds Unitarian Meeting House on Saturday 24 September 2011 as part of 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the erection of the building.

Going back to being in the shoes of a dissenter from the Church of England in 1711 would of course be a shock to those who worship in this meeting house today. The congregation is seen as continuous, except for a few gaps, but the culture and beliefs are very different. One of the most famous opening sentence to a 20<sup>th</sup> century novel is to be found in LP Hartley's, *'The Go Between'* 'The past is another country'. And that is what the life and thought of a 1711 dissenter would be to us today.

To start with those who attended this meeting house were basically still puritans, who were very nastily described by the Roman Catholic author GK Chesterton as 'people who refused to contemplate God or goodness with anything lighter or milder than the most fierce concentration on the intellect. A Puritan originally meant a man whose mind had no holidays. To use his own favourite phrase, he would let no living thing come between him and his God; an attitude which involved eternal torture for him and a cruel contempt for others.' Chesterton added even more unfairly; 'it was better for the Puritan to worship in a barn than in a cathedral for the specific and specified reason that the cathedral was beautiful.' There is more than a germ of truth in this but he ignores or didn't know the fact that a barn was in their early days was the only place where dissenters could meet.

Chesterton certainly would not have understood the simple and dignified beauty of this building and the thought and understanding of the people who created it. These dissenters could not see how their relationship to God and their family of worshippers could be expressed in anything but a simple structure built in the way it is, unadorned, so unlike a cathedral or parish church.

To start with it was called by dissenters 'a meeting house' which means literally where the faithful met together. Meeting house has a very similar meaning to the word synagogue, taken from the Biblical term 'a place of gathering'. It was not a chapel and very much not a church. The meeting house was where those of the community met to pray and hear the Bible expounded. Those who gathered here were English Presbyterians, in 1711 still the largest group in numbers amongst dissenters, but their outlook was similar to the Independents (later Congregationalist) who also met in Bury. Both followed the writings and example of Richard Baxter, a key leader of the Presbyterian/Independent cause who had died not many years before. Although called Presbyterian there was no synod and certainly not in Bury.

The Independents and Presbyterians in the main still freely associated and the difference between them was more a matter of emphasis than a big difference in principle or belief. By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century the situation had evolved into something different. The last time the minister of this meeting house participated in an ordination service in the Independent chapel was on 19 June 1800. To quote a later commentator: 'Henceforth the doctrinal differences were too great to permit such friendly relations; the Presbyterian congregation at this time became distinctly Unitarian and the Independents no longer sympathised with them.'

In 1711 the dissenters were a beleaguered minority although since the settlement of 1689 were able to meet and erect their meeting houses. It looked as if all would be well but from 1709 there were the Sacheverell upheavals directed against dissenters who were termed by their attackers 'monsters and vipers'. As David Wykes has pointed out, 'Dissenters locally were subject to verbal abuse, frequent petty acts of harassment, intimidation, even violence.' In particular feeling was against those dissenters who also attended the Church of England occasionally in order to hold certain offices like teachers who supposedly spoke vile things against the Church. An Act of 1711 forbade occasional conformity which in most places proved unenforceable and was repealed in 1719. Later a Schism Bill was under discussion which many thought would return dissenters to an almost outlawed status. This fortuitously did not happen, Queen Anne died in 1714 as the Bill came into law, and it sought to create an Anglican monopoly in education. The early years of the 18th century saw persecution in particular at the time of public elections. The meeting house at Chester was nearly destroyed twice and rioters burned down that at Newcastle under Lyme in 1702. Thankfully things improved with the advent of the Hanoverians in the shape of George 1 in 1714, and arrival of the Whigs into political power. In 1711 all this agitation was almost at its height and anti-dissenter feeling was rumbling about. It was thus a brave act to open a new meeting house in that troubled year.

What were these people like who filled the new building when it was opened on 30 December 1711? There were two sermons that day based on the Bible text of Exodus 11 verse 34, 'Then the cloud covered the tent of the congregation and the Glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.' Well to start with they were not Unitarians or Socinians in belief or even Arian, nor anything like it either. They were people of Book which was at the centre of their personal and family life, and many of their beliefs could be called neo-Calvinist. In other words many believed in an elect of God. They were Trinitarian, and it was not until the ministry of William Lincolne between 1757 and 1792 that they became mainly Arian in belief which meant worship of God the father alone, seeing Jesus as subordinate but still divine. They placed great emphasis on the King's James Version of the Bible which in 1711 was then 100 years old, an anniversary which we have been noting this year - they quoted from it endlessly. The first avowed Unitarian minister to be appointed at Bury was Dr Nathaniel Phillips in 1801.

What were the services like then? There are few contemporaneous accounts available, but the pattern followed by Matthew Henry, the Presbyterian minister at Chester is seen as typical. The minister at Bury from 1690 was Samuel Bury (1663 -1730) who studied at Doolittle's Academy in London with Matthew Henry as a compatriot. Bury's exact theological views are not known except that he refused to belong to a party or theological group, which makes commentators list him as a liberal in his time. He wrote, 'I was never prostituted to any party but have endeavoured to serve God as a catholic Christian.' Of course he did not mean Roman Catholic. Whatever his beliefs were he was an energetic and highly successful preacher and minister.

Samuel Bury would have followed a similar pattern of working to Henry's which seems to have been common. 'Henry's constant work, on the Lord's-day at Chester, was to pray six times in public, to sing six times, to expound twice. He went to the congregation exactly at

nine, began the public worship with singing the 100<sup>th</sup> psalm; then prayed, a short but fervent and suitable prayer, then he read some part of the Old Testament, and expounded it, going through it in course, from beginning to the end; then he sang another psalm, then he prayed for about half an hour, then preached about an hour, then prayed and sang and gave the blessing. He did exactly the same in the afternoon, only expounding the New Testament. This was his constant Lord-day's work.'

Phew! What about that then! - two hour plus services containing 30 minutes extempore prayer and about 20 minutes explaining a text. Preaching and prayer then was undertaken without notes, it was meant to be as the spirit moved. In some places, though no evidence that it was done here, it will not surprise you that there were people appointed with long sticks to wake people up. And if you think the box pews that were here were as comfortable as what you're sitting on, you've never sat in an 18<sup>th</sup> century pew with no cushion though some will have done. The congregation sat most of the time and were silent most of time. Only psalms were sung, no hymns then except on special occasions, and standing up to sing them was not universal. There was no music, it was suspect as an activity in services, only a tuning fork might be used— small orchestras to accompany the singing came later in the century.

At the end of a Sunday the minister must have been really exhausted though perhaps his personal reward was that he was a figure of great power in his community. A critic in 1730 speaking on the decline of dissent at that time observed that 'to worship God for 20 minutes and to dictate to all for 60, is not so equal as one could wish.' No doubt the critic was right. There were never evening services and lighting the candelabra where they existed was a rare and quite costly event. Tallow candles were the cheapest but made of animal fat so they smelt; wax candles were necessary but at the top end of the cost scale.

And what happened when the families, and all of them attended, got home? To quote a contemporary account, 'After retirement for the secret exercises of devotion, in reading and meditation, and prayer, the family was called together, the children and servants catechised and questioned on the discourses which they had heard, a sermon was read, and psalms were sung and the day was concluded with fervent and solemn prayer.'

You might say that's what they did at Chester but not perhaps at Bury? We have the much edited diary of Elizabeth Bury, the wife of the minister Samuel, which shows a similar pattern. She died in 1720 when they had moved to Bristol as Samuel became the minister of Lewin's Mead Meeting House. Samuel edited her diary drastically to always present her in a devout light; it was published and considered very much an aid to devotion and she an exemplar; it sold well. The diary was republished a few years ago in America and is available on Amazon. The shame is that the original is lost, which would have shown more of her true nature. Extracts demonstrate her concern about the servants' spiritual health for she regularly quizzed them on the contents of the sermon. Similar devotions were held on most nights of week. While some families might not be as fervent as this it's likely many came near to it and most had prayers morning and night everyday.

Elizabeth Bury was a paragon of virtue, of whom the famous hymn writer Isaac Watts in a form of obituary said she was 'a pattern for the sex in ages as yet unborn'. A rich widow she married Samuel in 1697, and was 19 years older than him. She got up at 4am every day to pursue her studies in French, Hebrew, music, heraldry, mathematics, natural philosophy, anatomy, medicine and divinity. She like so many in the congregation was no light dilettante.

Not only were there long Sunday services to attend but also lectures in the week to go to, in the chapel and elsewhere, which were nearly all related to a Biblical theme. Here is Elizabeth Bury's diary account verbatim: '25 January 1699, I walked to a Lecture safely and without prejudice to my health, at 16 miles distance, and had entertainment to my Soul there.' And there were meetings for women which were not about items that might be discussed today. '6 December 1711, I was much revived at a meeting of good Women for Prayer and Repetition in which my heart was warmed.' The congregation ignored Christmas and similar festivals seeing them, like the regular repetition of the Lord's Prayer, as little more than Popish heresies. But they did listen to fairly regular fast sermons given by the minister - this is where dissenters fitted in with national events - a fast sermon was declared to be given at times of crisis like war. Samuel Bury is here commenting at the start of the diary on his late wife's attitude to them. 'She would always bless God, if authority appointed, at Public Fasts; and looked upon them as Presages of Good to the Church and Nation. She bore her part in them with great fervency and zeal.' She seems to have been a paragon of dissenting virtue, and oh so serious.

One of the key services of the year, for dissenters in particular, was to celebrate the discovery and putting down of the Gunpowder Plot to blow up Parliament in November 1605. Long rousing sermons against Roman Catholicism and Popery were then the norm on these occasions. To hold a service of worship to celebrate Guy Fawkes Day on 5 November we would find odd, but dissenters and to a large extent the Church of England saw it as an occasion to give praise for what was presented as a deliverance from Popery in England. They also held communion about once a month generally after morning service, sometimes the congregation sat round a table but more often and almost certainly at Bury they would serve each other as the plate and cup passed from hand to hand. The ceremony was simple but still could be a matter of much dispute.

Before 1720 there is a record at Dr Williams's Library that shows there were 700 members at Bury – an amazing number, obviously they could not all get in here, as a roughly contemporary source states this building could house 400. The former building, a converted house used from 1690 on this site was certainly smaller. Where were they from? Some met in places within Bury, but others were located in villages round about specifically Sudbury, Waldringfield, Magna Hunston, Ixworth and Wattisfield. From the 1680s onwards there are registrations as places for public worship located in barns, private houses and farms. These were outstations of the main congregation and examples of scattered small worshipping groups in villages round the hub of a town meeting can be found all over England.

The Minister's job was a tough and onerous one as he was expected to visit each sub congregation at least once a month - not long after the new chapel opened Samuel Bury had an assistant Rev Samuel Savage, his nephew, replaced later by Rev Robert Wright. The Ancient Chapel at Toxteth in Liverpool for example had twelve of these out congregations at about this time. Samuel Bury was paid well at £80 a year; many Baptist ministers existed on less than £25. The sexton in comparison was paid £2 a year. With the help of his wife's money Bury advanced money for the building of this meeting house before all the subscriptions came in to meet the cost. He was not paid back in full until 1714.

This payment made to Samuel Bury shows the congregation was quite well off amongst dissenters which consisted of farmers, tradesmen, manufacturers and the like. Not many gentry by 1711 who had generally disappeared from dissenting congregations, nor were the poor present in any numbers. Pew rents were the main source of income for the meeting house, sometimes they had sliding scales of payment; nowhere outside London or the city congregations was it pitched at a high figure, about 10 shilling to £1.10/- per quarter was the norm. Then as now some members were richer than others and no doubt made their presence felt.

There are very few studies to show the income levels of congregations at this time, but it is clear that Bury being able to erect this meeting house in the centre of town was amongst the richer; Bury St Edmunds generally at this time attracted the well-to-do to live there. One of the few comparative studies of this period comes from an examination of the returns made of tax paid on hearths at this time – how many per household. For counties in this area these show that Independents and Quakers had 2.2 hearths, Baptists 1.9 but Presbyterians had 3.1 per household. They could afford to keep themselves relatively warm.

Of course not all members of the congregation behaved themselves as they should, and the Minister acted with great power in this respect. The Presbyterian, as the minister was called, was said to be like a Bishop in his own congregation. The Heads of Agreement amongst dissenting meetings of the 1690s stated 'In the administration of church power, it belongs to the pastors and other elders of every particular church, if such there be, to rule and govern.' Democracy was not the order of the day. How was this governance exercised? There was no church committee, that was a 19<sup>th</sup> century invention, but there were groups of influential members, one being the trustees whom the minister consulted, and the pew holders who provided the regular income.

There were church meetings of the members in some Presbyterian congregations though its universality and power lay more amongst the Independents. In such a tight group there were of course whispers and gossip and the whole dissenting community of Bury was small. Everyone who was a dissenter was concerned about the reputation of the dissenting interest especially if the Church of England could make much of dissenters' transgressions, which they did if transgressions became known. The frisson between dissent and the Church went on until almost the 20<sup>th</sup> century in small towns and rural areas, and I'll say a bit more about that shortly.

Maintaining the health of the community, and be sure that bad eggs did not spoil it, was achieved by suspending or at the most extreme expelling members. It was called 'discipline' as you might expect. It was quite a threat to be disowned by the community of which you and your family were so much a part. Some congregations kept a discipline book – what thoughts that phrase can raise in 21<sup>st</sup> century minds – but I know of none left to us of this period. Presbyterians were among the first to drop members' discipline although books are to be found in Baptist congregations in the 1770s. Methodists toyed with them but by the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century they had generally disappeared. To show what they were like here is an example from a later period from the Old Meeting House, Ditchling, Sussex which was General Baptist. Something like this will have existed in Presbyterian groups early in the century:

May 10<sup>th</sup> 1757 Church meeting. The case of John Vincent was considered and whereas he has been admonished several times and has promised a reformation, but still remains in a careless way and seldom goes to any hearing of a Sunday and follows gaming and keeping of bad company and breaks his promises in regard to making good his payments, therefore we agree to withdraw from him for such disorderly walking.

Disorderly walking. What a phrase, used commonly amongst dissenters then and we know exactly what it means. The Heads of Agreement of the 1690s mentions 'scandalous or offensive walking' which required offenders to be admonished or censured generally in public to seek their recovery from sin. You might say that such suspensions didn't happen at Bury - oh yes they did and we have Elizabeth Bury's diary to demonstrate its operation here: 1<sup>st</sup> July 1716. After Sermon, a Poor Penitential, after long suspension, was re-admitted to our communion with great seriousness and solemnity by the Pastor; and I hope true repentance in the offender. Lord! Let this awaken others who stay suspended.

Now to cover what can only be termed the social and religious split between dissenters and members of the Church of England. This was not necessarily between the ministers and the vicar or rector where relations could be polite if not cordial but were savage in other places. In smallish towns like Bury with a strong dissenting interest the split spread much wider than between ministers. Up until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century shopkeepers for example who were dissenters attracted and expected the continued custom of their fellow dissenters. The same situation obtained for the Church of England. William Hale White writing as Mark Rutherford based his novels on his dissenting youth in Cowfold (in reality Bedford) and Mrs Margaret Oliphant in *Chronicles of Carlingford* both describe the social position of nonconformists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but the tradition of relations with Anglicans came from an earlier period when it was much more acrimonious. The two groups lived in almost different worlds made more distinct by the extra dimension of class distinction. Unless essential they often did not even speak. Individual Dissenters were badgered to conform and threatened with consequences if it didn't happen. In 1713 attacks on dissenters were widespread in most parts of the country. The Church of England saw the results of the end of their religious monopoly as dire. High churchman refused to bury the children of Dissenters stating that they were not properly baptised, this was an organised activity in Derby in 1712, and led Dissenters to create their own burial grounds.

This is the reason why not meeting your payments was considered as the ultimate sin – the dissenter was not only financially letting down their fellow dissenter tradesmen but was also diminishing the whole interest in the eyes of the Church of England. The example of the General Baptist John Vincent at Ditchling in 1757 the chapel meeting placed not meeting his payments as the last reason for his suspension but it was probably the main one. The reputation for moral rectitude, honesty and sobriety was an important one to maintain in small often rural communities.

Marriage generally took place between members of those associated with the same congregation. Marriage ceremonies up to the early 1720s took place in dissenting churches. The practice tended to disappear after this until 1753 when it was banned altogether outside the Church of England by Hardwick's Marriage Act. Marriage with a member of the Church of England was almost inconceivable within a small town. Dissenters who sometimes

attended worship in the parish church were engaged in an activity called ‘occasional conformity’. This action was made illegal from 1711 but it was difficult to enforce and continued to take place. It was done at certain times of the year to enable someone to hold a particular public office, and was frowned upon by most dissenters though it was not unusual amongst the richer Presbyterians. For Baptists those who occasionally conformed by going to what they called ‘the mass’ were ejected from the Baptist community.

Ministers who came from dissenting academies which were few at this time were almost advised in their training to find rich widows amongst their congregations to marry; this is what Samuel Bury did – his wife much older than he, and a widow left comfortable off. A leading dissenting minister from a later period Job Orton, on advising a young man not to marry a penniless girl wrote, ‘you may reasonably expect, considering your education, profession and station, that you may meet with a wife with a handsome fortune, as many other dissenting ministers have done.’ Rich widows and heiresses were therefore much sought after by dissenting ministers whose position then at least made them attractive to serious minded women.

How to sum up what it was like to be a dissenter in 1711? It was a serious devout life bounded by the Bible, and centred round the meeting house. There much emphasis on the family not only your own immediate one but also that which gathered in the meeting house. You mixed with your own kind, the dissenting interest, and not outside it. Your dress was sober as you yourself were with of course exceptions when it came to alcohol. Dissenting concerns were not financial, and had no need to be within the community; indeed the avid pursuit of money by an individual was frowned upon though the position in London, as ever, was rather different.

Apart from upkeep of an unpretentious building like this and providing for the minister with a moderate stipend, the group had few calls on their purses. There were generally small endowments often involving gifts of land that fulfilled many of the general expenses from year to year. The congregation had few poor members like labourers amongst it and any particular needs in this area were met from within. There were no central organisations to maintain, and where there were trust funds to support the Presbyterian denomination these were in the main given by the wealthy London dissenters. Pew rents commenced once the building was up and running and varied little from year to year; if the minister produced a real upset for one reason or another then these rents could decline and he could be forced to leave but not really for any other reason, except for conforming to the Church of England.

While exciting things happened in the wider world in a quiet country town like Bury St Edmunds the moral earnestness of the dissenter just continued in the same tenor from year to year. Membership of some meeting houses, particularly Presbyterian, however did decline after 1715 as some richer members, not over concerned with theology, found it easier all round to join the parish church. Later generations would conclude that the dissenters’ life around 1711 was in the main a boring one, not only because of their views but also that dissenters were under attack and kept in their place by the Church of England system and the social mores of the time. Among dissenters imagination was not seen as a desirable quality and the primacy of the word meant that appeals to the emotions were downplayed. Isaac Watt’s hymns came along a few years later and some of these introduced an enhanced vision

into dissent. I’ll conclude with a verse from one of his hymns which expresses something brighter and less dour. Most dissenters of the early 18th century are likely to have judged this verse as a notable expression of their affirmations:

The voice that rolls the stars along  
Speaks all the promises,  
Where reason fails with all her powers,  
There faith prevails, and love adores.

### **Bury St Edmunds Meeting House**

The principle item to report is of course the ter-centenary celebrations of the construction of the Unitarian Meeting House in Bury St. Edmunds. These are ongoing as I write and continue up to the year’s end. They have been an enormous success, with sell outs at lectures, musical events choral and instrumental and a coffee morning all backed up by input from the Record Office, the Royal Theatre and the Moyses’s Hall museum. The improvements to the toilets and the fire escape route were all completed on time; disabled access improvements are held up due to shortage of funds. It has been a most exciting summer.

The Bury St. Edmunds congregation has suffered two grievous losses this summer: the deaths of our dearly beloved companions Margaret Hamer and Ben Johnson within days of each other. Both were well-known not just locally but throughout the Unitarian persuasion for their unswerving adherence to the principles that we all try to follow. Margaret was of course a leading light in the East Anglian Women’s Group and for many years a member of the GA Council, as well as a leading Unitarian in Cambridge and Chairman of the congregation here as well as a Trustee. Ben’s experience included many years membership of the FOY Society (74 years!) and the Cambridge congregation as well as being a Director of a well respected Cambridge building company and President of the Chartered Institute of Builders. Wherever they are now, they will be earning the plaudits and thanks of their companions, their friends, their colleagues. We are all the richer for their having been here amongst us.

Our well supported monthly meetings continue under Martin Gienke’s guidance and we are now drawing together to consider how we shall manage without him in 2012 and beyond. There have been many mutterings about golf. The Trustees’ input has been added to our deliberations and the congregation’s input has been a major source of ideas. It has not been so much a matter of “we’ll never be able to do that” (of course, many congregations have been there before us): more a case of “Of course, Martin must have done that and made it look so seamless we never thought about it”. I fear the seams will start to show, but we shall get there!

Richard Hegerty

## **Cambridge Church**

Overall numbers remain steady, those leaving for career reasons balanced by those who come to take up studies or research at the University. Numbers at the morning service at 10.30 am are variable. We welcome the regulars, the 'irregulars' who come every 4 to 6 weeks, and visitors. Children are at a premium. A family of four is growing up and may soon outgrow the Sunday children's activities provided on the first Sunday of the month. There are several young parents who find it difficult to bring their youngsters – especially at the time when they are no longer babes in arms but too young for organised activities. Participation in the services is encouraged with a different member lighting the chalice and giving the opening prayer. The congregation is encouraged to comment on the Minister's address – sometimes no one wants to say anything, on other occasions there are many contributions. The address, which is published on our website, forms the basis for the Wednesday evening discussion group. Except August, there is an evening service at 6.30 pm of meditation, prayers, readings, and music. Members have taken services when the minister is on holiday. Music is provided by organists and pianists.

We are keen on refreshments – coffee after the service, bring and share lunches on the first Sunday of the month, tea parties at members' homes, drinking in the local pub.

A coffee morning was held in aid of Macmillan Cancer Support. During advent we collected for UNICEF appeal for Pakistani children affected by the floods.

Following a report from our architect, we are steady working through a number of repairs dealing first with the urgent ones relating to roofs, gutters and downpipes – it is essential to keep the premises watertight. Due to the painting firm not being able to carry out the internal decoration of the hall in the August time frame, the painting has been postponed until next year. An apparently simple job of installing a shower in the Top Flat at our letting property, Tallerman House, turned out quite expensive as it entailed considerable work in the bathroom and the adjoining kitchen. The current tenants are delighted and we hope that the flat will prove more attractive to future tenants. There are plans this autumn to carry out improvements to the church garden.

The hall is let to a wide variety of organisations who appreciate its homely atmosphere. It provides a steady source of income. The church is let for concerts.

As a congregation we do not engage in social activities. However, individual members are involved in a variety of political, environmental and welfare organisations.

Shirley Fieldhouse

## **Chelmsford Fellowship**

Fellowship numbers have never been high, so that we keenly feel the loss of longstanding members Miles and Jane Howarth. They were the founders of the group back in the 1970s and have been tremendously supportive of the Fellowship; they have now retired to Marlborough to be near family. Before they left in September we presented each with a pen, book token and bookplates specially designed by the husband of a member. Another couple is returning to America. However, we have welcomed a new member who is becoming very active and we hope in the course of the next year she will be joined by other newcomers. In the meantime we continue with monthly gatherings at 3 pm on the fourth Sunday of the month at the Friends Meeting House. The pattern is a service one month led by a Unitarian minister and a discussion on the second month. Details are given on our website.

Doug Kinglsey

## **Colchester Unitarians**

Colchester Unitarians have continued to meet in members' homes on Sunday evenings nine times a year. The theme of our recent meetings has been "God in Us", including a study of aspects of the Quaker tradition. We have also supported the activities of the Multi-Faith Chaplaincy at Essex University. Our numbers remain at about the same level, and our very modest financial needs are being met.

Alan Hayman

## **Framlingham**

The good news is that the refurbishment of the Meeting House is now complete and the congregation has a splendid building.

The not so good news is that the congregation is struggling. Following the retirement of Ray Seal at the end of June he and his wife Sheila have withdrawn from attendance at services for a while. This leaves a depleted congregation without an organist and no organisational structure. Considering the ages of the remaining attendees and their abilities it is difficult to see how any organisational structure can be achieved at present. It is unlikely that Ray and Sheila will return to regular attendance and they will not be providing organisational support as they have done in the past. However, there is hope. The recently appointed new secretary of the Framlingham & Bedfield Trusts is keen to get involved and her husband is equally keen to look after the premises.

## Old Meeting, Great Yarmouth

- Services continue to be held every Sunday at 3.00pm, taken by the Chairman, President and guests.
- Lord's Supper services held mid-summer and at Harvest Festival, the next being due on December 11th.
- Carol Service to be held on December 18th.
- Open-air service held at Filby Heritage Site on August 21st, well-attended by members of both Old Meeting and Octagon.
- Eastern Union Summer Meeting hosted at Old Meeting, service being taken by Ann Peart, president of the G.A.
- Support, through service attendance, gratefully given by members of the Octagon Chapel.
- We have experienced a decrease in our numbers due to one youth leaving the church, and two elderly members who are too infirm to attend.
- Services now being arranged to be held in the home of the elderly/infirm members.
- Charitable contributions to - Salvation Army, following collection of monies and produce at Harvest Festival. Items donated to the local Shoe Box at Christmas appeal.
- Church open for the Norfolk Heritage Week - few visitors, perhaps due to the Maritime Festival running at the same time.
- Church also open for the Norfolk Churches Sponsored Cycle Ride, also held at the same time as the above.
- Maintenance work nears completion, with plans for some redecoration in the Spring of 2012.
- Phyllis Adams School of Dance have renewed their lease and the other dance groups continue to hire the Lower Hall three evenings each week.
- The president continues to maintain ties with the Great Yarmouth College chaplaincy.
- In spite of efforts made to integrate with other denominations, we have been excluded from membership of the Borough Wide Churches Forum, though it offers us the opportunity to attend their meetings on an 'observer' status only.
- We continue to remain off the list of churches that are invited to attend various functions in the borough, such as the Remembrance service at the local memorial, Jewish Holocaust service etc.

Don McAllister

## Ipswich Meeting House

Whilst all appears calm on the surface, underneath there has been a considerable amount of work going on within the Ipswich Congregation.

With the pending retirement of our minister in September 2012, a congregational questionnaire was compiled; from the answers, our Search Committee produced a document

setting out the requirements and information on the Ipswich and Framlingham congregations. This has now been completed and sent off to the Director of Ministry at Essex Hall.

Our Property Manager too has been very busy organising painting of Meeting House windows and significant work to be carried out on our leased out properties. Grasscrete has been laid in the forecourt which has proved to be a good move as we are now able to park on the grass without causing any damage. He has battled the Local Authority re off street parking at the Manse and whilst this battle has been lost the war is yet to be won!!

Congregational life has been full and varied with the main emphasis being our meeting for worship together. Our minister's sermons are now uploaded - or should it be downloaded - on the web and are hopefully enjoyed by more people than those in our congregation. In August we were pleased to welcome Rev Frank Walker and to have the three remaining services taken by members of our congregation, thus providing a wide spectrum of thought. We have a regular attendance of 25 - 30 at morning service.

Our membership stands at 46. We were very sad at the death of Peggy Crabtree, at 95 yrs old, our oldest member. Before infirmity overtook her, Peggy was a tireless worker within the Ipswich Meeting and the Eastern Union. We welcomed two new members at our membership service in January and, so far this year have had two more accepted in to membership.

Fund raising continues and we have recently been pleased to hear from the J.T. Sunderland School of the success of three senior pupils in public examinations, a first for many years. By October we hope to have reached our £1,000 target for the Send a Child to Hucklow Fund. Individual members have also hosted fund raising events for the Sunderland School and the St Elizabeth Hospice. A goods donation was also given in December to the Zimbabwean Women's safe house.

Besides the 'normal' EU events such as the Summer Meeting and Development Day, members have been involved with local interfaith and racial equality groups. Our minister is still the lynch-pin for the organising of the Mayor's Civic Celebration of Community and has this year been heard several times on the air waves of Radio Suffolk.... as well as publishing a new book on Darwin and receiving one of the first Founders Vision Awards from the ICUU...and conducting his son Edmund's wedding to Melanie at the Meeting House!

We continue to have the Meeting House open from May to September and welcome many individual visitors and groups. The recent Historic Churches Bike Ride and Heritage Open Day weekend saw over 500 visitors through the door, many of whom asked about Unitarianism.

Linda King

### Octagon Chapel, Norwich

Attendance at Sunday morning worship services is up 30%. Membership is growing. We benefit from a variety of in-house and visiting speakers and a stimulating programme of topics. We have hosted special services this year including an evening service marking LGBT Pride and a Carol Service.

There have been 5 weddings, a naming and a memorial service for Ivy Meadows.

2010 saw the formation of the Octagon Discussion Group which builds on topics raised during services and gives more scope for spiritual and religious issues. There continues to be much debate and discussion at coffee time after the service.

The Sunday Club continues to grow and flourish. There is a rota of enthusiastic and talented leaders and a number of projects to stimulate and encourage the children eg 'Doing something funny for money'. Their involvement in morning worship is growing. They light the chalice, take the collection, give out hymn books and give presentations of the projects.

The Social Responsibility Group is very active leading projects both within and outside the Octagon. Locally we support St Martin's Housing Trust (a charity which cares for homeless men), Doughty's Hospital (for elderly residents) and the work of the Salvation Army. Two new groups have been formed this year. One which offers support for those with memory difficulties and their Carers. The second is a group supporting women in pregnancy and offers follow up help. The concert Series continues with the addition of Wednesday lunch-time concerts. The Martineau Hall and the Chapel are being used increasingly by the public for various activities, including drama productions by the UEA.

Several Octagon members and some children have attended events at Great Hucklow. Representatives attend the Eastern Union and the EU Women's Group. Two representatives attended the GA where one of our members led morning worship. Members of the congregation attended the Open air service and picnic at Hapton and Filby. We continue to maintain links with Transylvania and the US. The Octagon and Unitarianism were well represented at a local major exhibition on The Art of Faith and the City. Also the Heritage Open Days, The Churches Trust Cycle-Ride, our Spring and Winter Fairs and the Chapel openings on Friday mornings all encouraged many visitors.

Iris Voegeli

### Future Events – 2012

- Saturday 10 March                      Development Day at Ipswich  
Rev. Andy Pakula, London Newington Green  
Subject: 'Becoming a 21st Century Unitarian Congregation'
- Sunday 24 June                          Summer Meeting at Framlingham  
3.0 pm Service: Lis Dyson-Jones, President elect of  
General Assembly of Unitarian & Free Christian  
Churches
- Saturday 29 September                Annual General Meeting at Ipswich  
Guest speaker: Derek McAuley, Chief Officer, General  
Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches.

### Directory

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