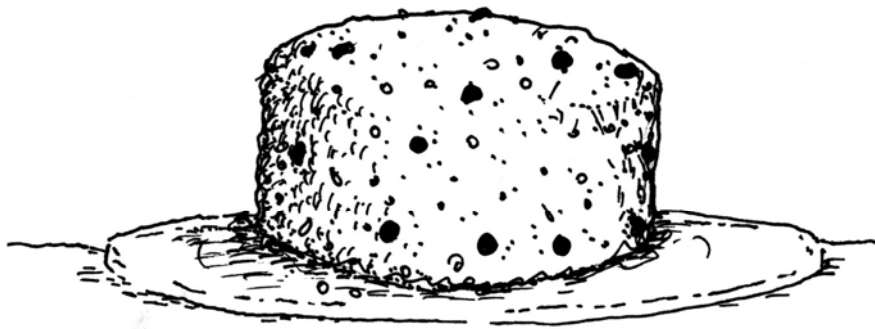


# **“Commitment, My Dear, Commitment”: A Study of Believing and Belonging in a Unitarian Congregation**



A dissertation  
submitted for assessment  
within  
The Partnership for Theological  
Education's Masters Programme in  
Contextual Theology,  
through The University of Manchester

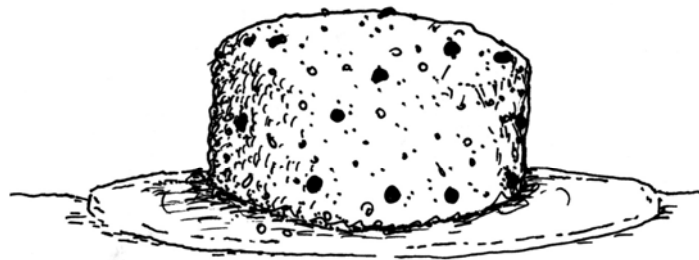
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## **Abstract**

This small study sits within three academic disciplines - the sociology of religion, congregational studies and practical theology. Taking its starting point in the on-going debates amongst sociologists about the increasing secularization of British society and the suggested increased interest in spirituality rather than religion, it gives a picture of believing and belonging in a Unitarian congregation in central London in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century and explores some of the theological and sociological implications of its findings, alongside more practical issues for the congregation to consider.



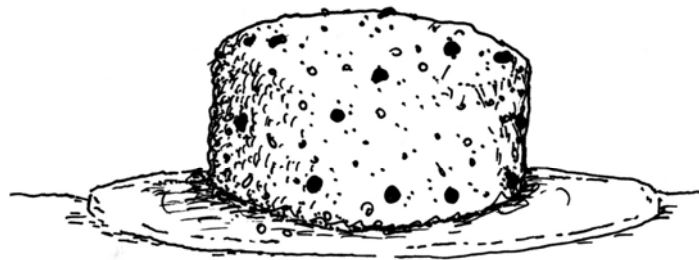
## Introduction

Nearly three years ago, fresh from ministerial training, I arrived in Notting Hill to start my first ministry, here at Essex Church. Tucked away in a folder was the research proposal for this dissertation – the idea of studying this congregation’s religious beliefs and their sense of belonging in this community. Born out of curiosity about these people among whom I would be ministering and a long-standing fascination with people who still go to church, in an era where church going is seen as anachronistic and faintly embarrassing by some, the research proposal certainly shaped some of my early work within the congregation, both in worship and small group activities. I kept notes of our work together and some of the processes we went through but as time went by it seemed less and less likely that the necessary research could ever be carried out. Staff changes, demanding building projects and the accompanying necessary fund-raising, personal issues of bereavement and life changes, the needs of a growing congregation – all seemed to have become insurmountable hurdles. Simply put, there would never be enough time.

But I had not reckoned on the determination of one of the congregation’s longstanding members who, on hearing of the unwritten dissertation, decided that it really should be written. She wrote to the church committee and strongly suggested that I be given time off to complete the work, she sent me encouraging messages and, when she found out about the three discussion evenings, she changed her plans in order to be able to attend them all. I asked her why she had given up a holiday abroad in order to attend a church discussion on three Thursday evenings and she replied, “*Commitment, my dear, commitment*” (journal note, 2008).

Those words stayed with me. I made them my own and muttered them when I really didn’t want to write another word or chase up another reference. I started to look at the data I had collected in a new way – as representative of people’s commitment to their community and to their own faith. This research was completed and this accompanying dissertation written up, with help from

many people here at Essex Church. Much of that help took a practical form, such as note taking, typing, suggesting areas to explore, lending me books and baking. The congregation has for many years been known for its small group activities and it has become a tradition that snacks are brought along to these sessions. The member whose commitment helped me to start on my research, would text me each week and seek suggestions as to what type of cake she should bring for the evening – apple cake, a traditional fruit cake, ginger perhaps? Each evening, as we explored together issues of belief and belonging, we ate slices of cake. I am probably not the first amateur researcher who has had a sense of the research process being akin to baking – the assembling of ingredients, the weighing, the sifting, the mixing, checking the temperature... the results that can never be fully predicted, occasional anxiety about the finished product, and the sense that even if you followed exactly the same recipe it might all turn out quite differently.



## Congregational Background

A congregational study by its very nature is unique. Each church community sits within its own milieu – within a denomination to which it belongs, within a local neighbourhood, within a culture, a nation, and ultimately our world. Congregations often sit also within their own building, which can be an important influence on, and reflection of, the nature of their community. Essex Unitarian Church has a proud history, taking its name from the first avowedly unitarian<sup>1</sup> congregation in England, which was established in 1774 in Essex Street, off The Strand, in the City of London. With the decline of the City's population, the congregation moved out to Kensington in the 1880s, joining with a congregation that had already started to meet there.



Fig. 1 shows the original Iron Church that was built in Kensington in 1874 and demolished in 1885.

Fig. 2 shows the church that replaced the Iron Church, a grand neo-Gothic design brick built church with a spire, which was opened for public worship in 1887 and was demolished in 1973.



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<sup>1</sup> Unitarian with a capital letter is generally used to refer to the denomination, whereas with a small letter it refers to a theological position.

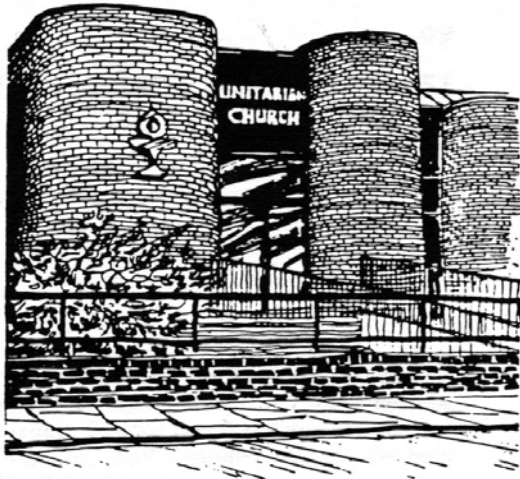


Fig. 3 shows the current Essex Church building that was opened in 1977.

A few congregation members are aware of, and proud of, this history. One writes that *"it is one of the reasons we must continue to exist!"* (Q.40)<sup>2</sup>. A decision was made in the late 1990s to call the congregation 'Kensington Unitarians', which was thought to be a more appealing and understandable title than Essex Church. As a Unitarian congregation, Kensington Unitarians have no fixed creeds. On its website and outside notice-board the congregation describes itself thus:

*"We are here to share our experiences, to learn from each other, to explore our diverse faiths, to welcome spiritual seekers and offer companionship on life's journey."* (App. C)

The congregation is one of 182 member congregations in Britain affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian & Free Christian Churches. Membership at Essex Church stood at 26 in May 2005 and had grown to 49 in May 2008, with membership defined by the completion of a membership form and a suggested minimum payment of £36 per annum. In addition the church has 'Friends' who make a financial contribution towards the cost of newsletter mailing and a number of regular attenders who choose not to become members. A feature of the weekly worship services that struck me when I first arrived here as minister was the relatively high number of visitors who attend, due to the church's location in the centre of the capital city and therefore an

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<sup>2</sup> All quotations from respondents' questionnaires are followed by the number that I assigned to that questionnaire – from 1 to 45, eg. (Q40).

easy location for tourists to reach, particularly Americans from Unitarian Universalist congregations, and from Unitarian congregations in Britain.

The church is situated close to Notting Hill Gate, within the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea, often regarded as one of the wealthiest local councils in the country, though with considerable diversity in terms of wealth, ethnicity and educational level. Interestingly, the Government Office for London in its 2007 Measure of Deprivation survey ranks the borough as 101<sup>st</sup> out of 354 local authorities in England and Wales, where 1<sup>st</sup> represents the most deprived borough.<sup>3</sup> In describing the church in the late 1800s, historian Raymond Williams comments that it is evident that amongst members “many left the district after a few years, and the area even then was assuming its modern character as a dormitory for birds of passage.” (p3, 1987) Of the current membership and regular attendees, only one person lives within walking distance of the church. Everyone else travels here by car or public transport.

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<sup>3</sup> See Governemnt Office for London website and data from 2001 census



## **Surveying The Field:**

### **The Sociology of Religion**

In such a huge field of academic study I chose to focus on the relatively narrow sociological work that stemmed from Grace Davie's seminal book, *Religion In Britain Since 1945* (1994), sub-titled *Believing Without Belonging*. In that book she suggested that the two terms of 'believing' and 'belonging' should not be considered too rigidly: "The disjunction between the variables is intended to capture a mood, to suggest an area of enquiry, a way of looking at the problem, not to describe a detailed set of characteristics." (p.93). Davie chose the terms to describe, "the persistence of the sacred in contemporary society despite the undeniable decline in church-going." (p.94) and it is this view of the religious domain in Britain that has been debated ever since. Secularization can be defined as the "process by which religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance" (Wilson, 1966: xiv). A number of sociologists have studied the decline in religious activity in Britain, Europe and the USA (though recognising that each culture has its distinctive circumstances and characteristics,) and have developed a theory of secularization, where a steady decline in religious affiliation is seen as an inevitable part of the modernization process within a society. Steve Bruce, who wrote *Religion in Modern Britain* (1995) and has continued to work extensively in this field, cites as evidence, for example, the steady decline in memberships of the major Christian denominations, the reduction in church and Sunday School attendance figures, the reduction in numbers of clergy and their increasing age (1995, p. 70) and concludes in a later essay that "Britain in 2030 will be a secular society" (2002, p.62). Much of the data collected in the field supports Bruce's views. Using the British Household Panel Survey and the British Social Attitudes surveys, Voas and Crockett conclude that belief has eroded at the same rate as belonging (measured by religious affiliation and attendance) and suggest that "'believing without belonging' was an interesting idea, but it is time for the slogan to enter honourable retirement," (2005, p.25).

This, however, is far from the end of the debate on this matter. People, and statistics about people, can sometimes surprise us and the 2001 census data,

which showed “unexpectedly high levels of residual attachment to Christianity (over 70% of the population in England and Wales indicated that they were Christian)” (Davie, 2005, p.299) has been much discussed, not least by those who regard the census question itself as flawed and the response therefore as debatable.<sup>4</sup> Davie argues that this statistic, however flawed, may demonstrate the British public’s commitment to ‘vicarious religion’, where a religious minority perform religious functions on behalf of the larger community, who may then access their services at times of personal or national distress (2005, p.285). With regard to the issue of ‘believing without belonging’ Davie, from the very start, made it clear that she was interested in exploring the continuance of religious beliefs that were not necessarily orthodox. While the statistics on the decline of religious affiliation are generally not disputed there continues to be lively debate in sociological circles between those who support the idea of an on-going and relentless move towards secularism as part of modernity and those who support a theory of sacralization or de-secularisation. The latter terms have been linked with the concept of post-modernity, which can be described as a “fragmentation of the ways in which we understand, organise and relate to society” (Courtney, 2002). For post-modernism there are no grand meta-narratives, be they religious or scientific, and in a fragmented and meaningless world perhaps people turn once again to an exploration of the sacred, though maybe in a different form from the institutional models of religion that would have attracted them in the past. Sociologist Peter Berger, who first developed the theory of secularisation, is now interested in sacralization and points out that “put simply, most of the world is bubbling with religious passions” (2002, p.293).

In her most recent work Grace Davie has started to explore in more depth the areas of the sacred that continue to be popular. She states that people are moving away from “forms of religion that are imposed or inherited to forms of religion that are primarily chosen” (2005 p.281). She proposes that people are attracted to religious organisations that provide an “experiential or feel-

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, L. Francis’ essay in P. Avis’ *Public Faith: The State of Religious Belief and Practice in Britain* (2003)

good factor” (2007, p.146) from which Davie puts forward the hypothesis that “late modern Europeans are much more likely to go to places of worship in which an *experience* of the sacred is central to the occasion” (2007, p.146).

This brings me to a brief description of a very interesting study known as The Kendal Project, described in Paul Heelas’ and Linda Woodhead’s book *The Spiritual Revolution: why religion is giving way to spirituality* (2005). Based at the University of Lancaster, the research team set out to test the theory that a turn away from organised religion is occurring in British society with a concurrent turn towards alternative spiritual approaches. They surveyed both the congregational domain and the holistic milieu in Kendal in considerable detail over a number of years and used as the basis for their work the concept of the subjectivization of modern society which they usefully explain:

“The subjective turn is thus a turn away from ‘life-as’ (life lived as a dutiful wife, father, husband, strong leader, self-made man etc.) to ‘subjective-life’ (life lived in deep connection with the unique experiences of my self-in-relation.” (2005, p.3). Heelas and Woodhead link religion with ‘life-as’ and spirituality with ‘subjective-life’ and their wide-ranging study explores the varying fortunes of these two domains. In studying the congregational domain they utilised a typology of four different congregational models

- congregations of difference – which emphasise the difference between God and humanity
- congregations of humanity – which emphasise the worship of God through serving humanity
- congregations of experiential difference – which continue to emphasise the gap between God and humanity but also that God can enter subjective experience through the Holy Spirit
- congregations of experiential humanity – which emphasise the links between God and humanity through humanitarian work and that the divine can be experienced within the individual rather than through sources of external authority such as sacred text or sacraments.

Within the congregations of experiential humanity studied in Kendal were the Quakers and the Unitarians and the researchers noted that, “most of the very

few individuals who are active within both the congregational domain *and* the holistic milieu are associated with the Unitarian chapel” (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005 p.31).

As I first read this I thought of my own congregation members and their wide-ranging interests and involvements. How might they fit into the developments Paul Heelas describes as “New Age spiritualities of life”, which are primarily concerned with “realizing one’s inner, true life” (Woodhead 2002 p.362)? How might this essentially individual path of exploration in life fit with membership of a church congregation?

### **Congregational Studies**

The field of congregational studies has flourished in recent years. When I began ministry training in 2003 I was delighted to read James Hopewell’s book *Congregation* (1987), which utilised narrative methods for studying congregations’ stories about themselves. This led me to seek out other works such as *The Handbook of Congregational Studies* (Carroll et al. 1986) and *Studying Congregations* (Ammerman et al. 1998), useful text books for newcomers to the field, including practical methods of studying church communities with a particular emphasis on the possibility of congregations engaging in studying themselves. But these books were based on studies of American congregations. Where were the current academic studies of the British congregations I would soon be working with as a ministry student? Two books soon arrived to answer my question. *Congregational Studies in the UK* (Guest et al, 2004) is a collection of essays written by a wide range of academics, stemming from a conference organised by the editors in 2001 who realized “just how much interesting but often unrecognised research was underway” in this area (2004, p. xiii). *Studying Local Churches: A Handbook* (Cameron et al, 2005) is, as its title suggests, a practical and thorough survey of the theories and methods available to those who wish to study local churches, utilising four disciplines of anthropology, sociology, organisational studies and theology. Both books convey the exciting, multi- and inter-disciplinary nature of modern congregational studies, where many different approaches and methodologies help to illuminate the organisations and communities that are being studied. From both of them I gained a wider

understanding of this particular field of academic study and the differences between the USA and the UK, with American studies tending to focus more extrinsically, as part of a wider concern for the well-being of the society in which a congregation is based. Current UK studies, on the other hand, tend to be smaller and more intrinsic in nature, undertaken with a focus on the congregation itself, without externally chosen agendas but generally also without external sources of funding. (Guest, Tusting & Woodhead, 2004, p. 2).

These editors conclude their introductory chapter by stating that those who study congregations now find themselves at a

“unique historical moment in which many congregations face collapse and extinction. This brings with it particular responsibilities: to study how congregations face this situation; to understand and explain why congregational decline has occurred; to illuminate the ways in which congregations maintain their distinctive life in the face of hostility or indifference; to explain why some congregations (and other forms of spiritual group) are managing to survive better than others.” (2004, p.19)

They are describing the responsibilities I sometimes feel as a minister, burdened against my better judgement with the feeling that I ‘should’ be increasing the size of this congregation, ‘should’ be running more successful events, ‘should’ be improving attendance figures for Sunday worship.

### **Practical and Pastoral Theology**

Teaching members of the clergy how best to deal with feeling over-responsible for the well-being of their congregations might once have been the preserve of those working in the field of pastoral and practical theology, concerned as they primarily were with practical methods of ministry, how best to ‘do the job’. Having expanded beyond the requirement to educate clergy in the methods of their trade into a far more nuanced, complex and reflexive realm, practical and pastoral theology is now “a diffuse and changing field that involves many diverse participants, methods, and concerns”. (Pattison & Woodward, 2000, p.4) Much has been written about the definition of this field of study and the appropriate use of the terms *practical* and *pastoral* but there seems to be some agreement that they are concerned with practice and with praxis, the dynamic relationship between practice and Christian theology in the ministry of the church along with “contemporary practices, issues and

experiences” (Pattison & Woodward, p.6). Practical theology has at its core a reflexive process that encourages the practitioner(s) to engage in continual reflection, better to understand what is occurring in a particular context as well as in themselves, and how that relates to faith.

Don Browning’s recognition of the value of “descriptive theology”, the possibility of a congregation creating a dialogue between their current situation and a historical tradition and his reminder of the inevitably “theory-laden nature of our practices” (1991, p.108-109) have had an important influence not only on the study of practical theology but also upon congregational studies, a point which is made perhaps somewhat wryly by Lyon when he writes:

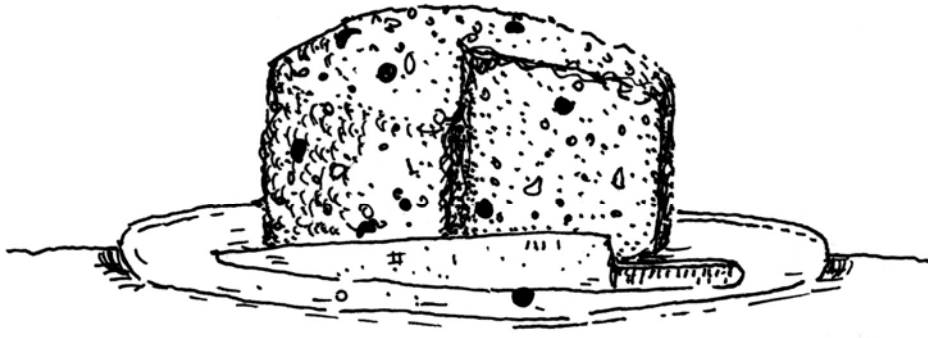
“The recognition of the depth and complexity of congregations has brought with it an avalanche of disciplinary perspectives being brought to bear on congregational life: anthropology, sociology, psychology, semiology, historical studies, aesthetics, literary symbolism, systems theory, and, on somewhat more infrequent occasions, even theology.” (Lyon, 2000, p.261)

Thus practical theology is an ideal area of study for the curious, for those who see a situation and want to know more. As Swinton and Mowat write, practical theology can be seen to “seek critically to complexify and explore situations” and by “a process of critical reflection at various levels, reveal that it is in fact complex and polyvalent.” (2006, p.13) Practical theology recognises that a congregation may have both explicit and implicit theologies, the latter of which may be hidden and unconscious, and possibly at odds with the prevailing theology that a congregation claims to hold (Schreier, 1998, p. 31). It also encourages a method of study that emerges from within a congregation rather than being imposed from outside, an approach colloquially known as ‘from the grass-roots up’.

Just as in congregational studies, there has been considerable development of work in practical theology on this side of the Atlantic in recent years, with two recent publications, *Theological Reflections: Methods* (2005) and *Theological Reflection: Sources* (2007) proving an invaluable resource. Rooted in real life and based on a typology of seven different methods of theological reflection, here was a clear explanation of a process that had

previously been unclear to me. Helpful too was Frances Ward's description of the praxis method of doing theology in *Studying Local Churches: A Handbook* (Cameron et al, 2005 pp. 23-24).

Practical theology reminds me that from the very start of this project that I, and my congregation, are engaging in theological reflection – both independently and together.



## **Method of Study**

With the church committee's agreement I was given time to carry out a study of believing and belonging within this church. This chosen area of research came from a desire to place this congregation within a context, to find out how we fitted within the wider picture of faith in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain. I was curious to know how well I could locate Essex Church within the current religious and spiritual trends described by sociologists such as Grace Davie (1994, 2007), Paul Heelas (2002, 2004) and Linda Woodhead (2002, 2004) and how to reflect theologically on what I found. My intention was to build up a picture of this community using a variety of qualitative research methods – focus groups, a questionnaire, a few follow up interviews and a study of printed and web based resources. This information could then be compared and contrasted with other existing studies.

Once the project was approved I placed an advertisement in our monthly newsletter inviting people to attend three evening sessions.

### ***Believing and Belonging***

*I am starting work on the dissertation for my Masters Degree in Contextual Theology. Its working title is 'Believing and Belonging' and it is a study of our congregation here at Essex Church. I want to research people's religious beliefs and reasons for belonging to our faith community in the context of 21st century Britain with its declining involvement in religious organizations yet increasing interest in what might be described as 'spirituality'. How do we fit into this picture? I am hoping that as many congregation members and friends of Essex Church as possible will take part in this research, which will involve a short questionnaire and three evening sessions, with a few follow up interviews. So do put the following dates in your diaries: **Thursdays 15th May, 5th and 19th June** from 7.00 to 8.45pm here at Essex Church. Thank you.*

This was an important part of the research process for me. Essex Church is a congregation with a great commitment to small group activities and considerable experience of discussing their beliefs and I wanted this research project to be a shared project as far as that was possible.

In the first session I explained the academic research background to this study. My introductory notes for that first evening were:



*Sociology of religion / cultural studies / congregational studies / theology / shock of 1960s decline in church attendance and membership / sociologists termed process 'secularisation'. On-going academic debate. Work of Grace Davie / Kendal study / interest in 'de-secularisation' / 'spiritual not religious' / studies on spirituality/ my question - where does Essex Church congregation fit in this wider picture?*

I asked participants to create spider-grams with 'religious and spiritual beliefs' at the centre and their responses to those words. Having worked on their own for five minutes they moved into groups of three to share their thoughts and then to create a flipchart list of questions or areas they would like to ask congregation members about their beliefs. These lists were typed up and brought to the second evening session, which focused on the issues of 'belonging'. We worked alone, in pairs and then in two groups exploring what it means to us to belong to Essex Church, what we gain from belonging, our own responses to belonging to any organisation, other places we belong, and the inter-relationship between our believing and our belonging – how they have affected one another.

In the final session I brought a draft questionnaire and as a whole group we tried out the questions and adapted them accordingly. One of the group took these comments and created the final questionnaire which was trialled on three people who were not members of the congregation and then emailed, distributed by hand or sent out by post to members, 'friends' of the congregation and regular attendees, with a covering letter. (see app. A, questionnaire; app. B, letter)

Once the deadline passed for the return of these questionnaires, the task of analysis began.

I had gathered together:

- research notes spanning the two and a half years of my ministry
- a journal I had begun during ministry training
- my notes and the typed up flipchart notes from 3 evening sessions
- 45 completed questionnaires
- additional notes from two phone interviews made to clarify answers on questionnaires

- additional documentary material relating to the congregation, which included:
- *a recent advertising leaflet*
- *a covenant statement created by a small self-selected group for the welcome service at the start of my ministry (App. C)*
- *the text of a church leaflet and outside notice-board*
- *monthly newsletters*
- *the Kensington Unitarians website*
- *a published booklet of 15 congregation members' statements of belief (Hague, 1987)*
- *a report of research carried out within the congregation in 2000 to help in their ministerial search, (Blackall, 2000)*
- *a statistical record of weekly services, which had been started in October 1994*
- *a published essay written by a congregation member on spiritual growth in communities (Von Britzke, 2002)*
- *a published history of the church (Williams, 1987)*
- *the church hymn books (Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993, 2006, Lindsey Press, 1995)*

Harry Wolcott in his helpful textbook *Writing Up Qualitative Research* reminds me that “qualitative researchers should reveal and revel in complexity” (2001, p. 76). The complexity starts for me with the very nature of my methods of research. In seeking to find out more about my congregation, I am engaging in an ethnographic study of a community, partly through the written responses of individuals to a questionnaire but equally through my observation of this community in which I participate as a paid member of staff, as a minister - a privileged position yet also a vulnerable one. Unitarian congregations are autonomous. I am in effect employed by the church trustees and therefore by the congregation I am now starting to study.

Anthropologists such as James Clifford (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003, p. 124) had established that a researcher would inevitably be enmeshed as part of the

field of study through the act of writing, and this viewpoint was developed further by early feminist researchers. Ann Oakley, for example, writing in 1981, stated the need for

“the mythology of ‘hygienic’ research with its own accompanying mystification of the researcher and the researched as objective instruments of data production (to) be replaced by the recognition that personal involvement is more than dangerous bias – it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives.” (2003, p.160)

Feminist research brought what I regard as a healthy emphasis on the value of conscious relatedness between researcher and researched and an insistence on the need for reflection on that process. It may now be academically acceptable for research to be carried out by someone who is already embedded in their chosen field of study but as a minister I had to reflect on the issues raised by, and some possible consequences of, this position.

Tim May points out that “data are produced, not collected” (2002, p.1). From the choosing of the research topic and the choice of methods onwards I am inextricably part of the process of data production, my presence will have affected the way people respond both in the small groups and in their questionnaires. I realise how much support congregation members are giving me in order to complete this work and I feel anxious about doing a ‘good job’ for them. They too want to do a ‘good job’ for me. The high response rate in returning questionnaires and various people’s queries of “was what I wrote alright?” are evidence of our mutual desire to please one another in this process. Even in the choosing of particular responses to use as examples in my analysis I am aware of a desire to show this congregation in a particularly favourable light and the need to let go of wanting to give everyone a voice, to include at least one quotation from each respondent so that no-one feels ‘left out’. Various key writers in the field of qualitative research have underlined important potential pitfalls that need to be born in mind in this type of research project – the assumption that a researcher can ever truly speak for the *Other* (Coffey, 2002, p.321) and that writing autobiographically as I am can become another way of creating a “spurious authority of authenticity” (Skeggs, 2002,

p. 364, referring to Atkinson, 1990). Describing this research in the personal way I have chosen, no longer makes it any *less* valid, but neither can that personal voice make it any *more* valid.

My chosen research methods contained flaws that quickly became apparent. The questionnaire responses were not necessarily anonymous. Some had been returned to me by email or by hand, some people had written their names on them, I could recognise some people by their handwriting or their stories. They were not anonymous to me and I was not anonymous to them. Some people had very consciously written *to* me as audience. Some had taken the opportunity to insert 'good luck' type messages or a more teasing "guess who!" One of the younger male respondents, who clearly knew something of the anxieties of social research, wrote, "Hope I improve the age demographics!" I decided that it was best not to comment to people about their responses, merely to thank them for taking part when next I saw them. But the nature of some of the responses was so personal and private, so confessional in nature, that people had clearly decided to utilise this medium for communicating with me privately about issues they had not spoken to me about before. Three people wrote a note on their questionnaires asking me not to quote particular aspects of their responses. The query remains as to whether I should approach people about these issues at a later date. Another flaw was that time constraints and the number of respondents meant that I could not carry out follow up interviews with people. The open-ended questions in the questionnaire had allowed people freedom to express themselves in writing but their fascinating accounts of their beliefs are not comparable with one another nor with any other similar studies. This research will not tell us how many people at Essex Church identify as theists, pantheists, humanists or any other faith position.

But there is a richness in people's responses, which vary from answers in short sentences to a few substantial essays, as well as some moving pieces of personal exploration. When musing on the different lengths of people's replies I notice that there is a difference between men's and women's responses. It is mostly women who have written at greater length and told

personal stories about their faith and their lives. It is mostly men who have located themselves in current trends of religious and social thought. Just one example of the endless possibilities I am offered in choosing where to take the analysis of this data, that so fits Clifford Geertz's famous term of 'thick description', which could be described as a multi-layered approach, both to data collection and analysis, and maintaining awareness of the richness of meaning and detail that can be found in seemingly small details. I remember Elaine Graham's description of women's story telling as a "disclosive practice" (1996, p.173) and wonder what these women's stories and men's theories disclose of their individual and shared theology.

This essay is a survey of believing and belonging but first and foremost it is a study of individuals within a community. Reading the questionnaires in particular is a joy, they are precious to me. I carry their file around with me and won't leave it in the office overnight – just in case. In her book *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (1997), Sally McFague describes how art and writing about nature can help us pay attention by putting a frame around the object; "something is lifted out of the world and put into a frame so that we can, perhaps for the first time, see it" (1997p.29). This process creates less of a subject and object relationship and more "a subject trying to know another subject" (1997 p.37). Her words reflect my feelings about these questionnaires. They are real, tangible expressions of real people who I work with and care deeply about. The written scripts, their chosen words, are putting a frame round these people for me, they are making me pay deep attention in a way I rarely make time to do in my working life. McFague writes that "the ecological model of being and knowing says that we should see others with a loving eye" that "recognizes distance and respects differences" (p.113). The completed questionnaires represent the people who have written them and are helping me to appreciate them anew.

The evocative term coined by Marcus to describe this sort of complexity in ethnographic studies is 'messy texts' - texts "in which the object of study always exceeds its analytic circumscription, and especially under conditions of postmodernity," (Marcus, 1994, p.567). The term is not pejorative. Marcus

points out that in messy texts “the territory that defines the object of study is mapped by the ethnographer who is within its landscape, moving and acting within it, rather than drawn from a transcendent, detached point,” (1994, p.567). Finally he states that messy texts are messy “because they insist on an open-endedness, an incompleteness, and an uncertainty about how to draw a text/analysis to a close” (1994, p. 567-568). Still I feel overwhelmed by the amount of data available to me and by the literally messy state of my office, which has been taken over by piles of books and files and papers, covering every available surface.

How to start on the analysis of these precious questionnaires? Firstly I numbered them and put them together in a file. I read them repeatedly. At an early stage I dealt with the immediately quantifiable data of age group, gender, whether or not a member and length of time associated with the church, whether or not people considered themselves to be a Unitarian and whether or not people had been born into Unitarianism. I also made a note of points I would want to clarify with people – in the end ringing two people and emailing one person asking for clarification on particular issues – one to do with difficulty reading a respondent’s writing, one seeking understanding of a particular phrase used and finally checking if one person had intended to leave out the whole of the last page (left by mistake on their kitchen table). By then I knew that the idea of conducting follow-up interviews would have to be shelved because of shortage of time.

I focussed in on particular questions, made notes of the themes that were starting to emerge and tried to give as much emphasis to the areas that felt different as I did to areas with which I was familiar and perhaps ‘expecting’ to find. Having chosen assorted themes I marked them wherever they occurred.

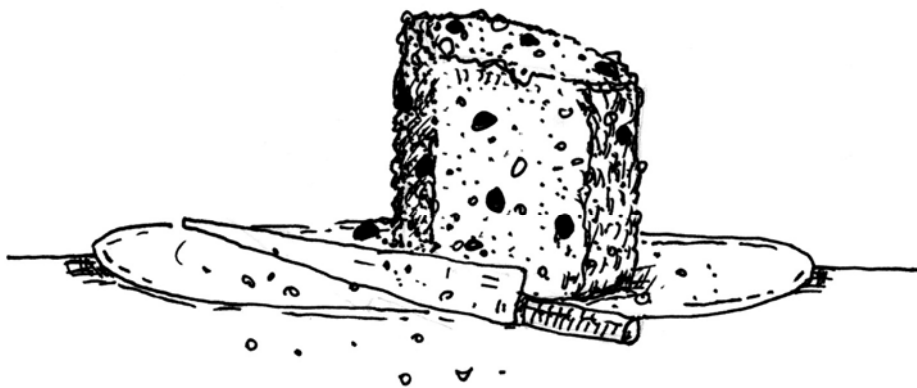
That original list included

- Points that interest me / that I like
- Points that I dislike or am uncomfortable with
- Positive / negative references to previous church membership
- Natural world / environmental issues

- Beliefs – questioning, uncertainty, no ‘one truth’ - where they are in their beliefs – theist, atheist, agnostic, pagan, ‘new age’
- Journey theme
- Increased confidence / self-development
- Worship
- Sense of being in transition
- Community
- Metaphors they utilise
- Spiritual practices

I thought about the silent or dissonant voices, and asked myself ‘what is perhaps not being said here?’

Once that early analysis of data from the questionnaires was completed I went back to the beginning. I looked at all my data from different sources. I went back to the research question and the work of professional researchers in the sociology of religion, congregational studies and practical theology that had originally interested and inspired me. What useful analysis and interpretation could now be made? Which of the many possible directions should I take? Where did this small congregation sit in the greater scheme of things? What points of note had emerged? What surprises were there? And what signposts were there for our future work together within this religious community?



### **“Stick to Facts”**

“Now what I want is, Facts. ... Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. ... Stick to facts, sir!” (Literature Online). So begins Charles Dickens’ novel *Hard Times*, with the words of the harshly rational industrialist Thomas Gradgrind. Perhaps a Gradgrind lives in many of us, that part of us that wants the world to be quantifiable and, by implication, therefore safe and manageable. As Gradgrind discovers in the course of Dickens’ novel, life has a tendency to spill out and make a mess, however much we try to keep everything in neat and accurately described categories. Reading through the returned questionnaires I wondered if other researchers had embarked upon a piece of qualitative research only to wish at the analysis stage that they had some results that were a little easier to grasp hold of. I looked again to see what could be quantified, counted, held firmly – perhaps creating some solid, numerical foundations on which to build. Here are the ‘facts’ that I had gathered:

55 questionnaires were distributed

45 were returned

**82% response rate**

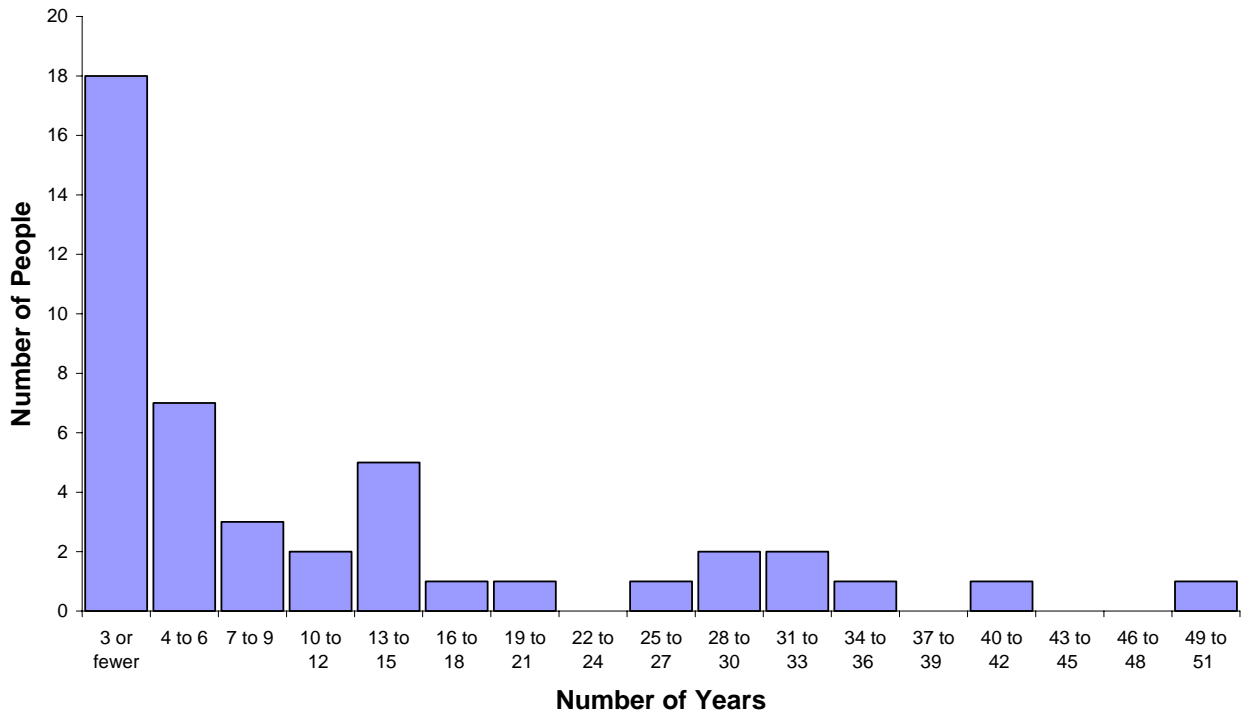
16 men and 29 women responded

**(36% men, 64% women)**

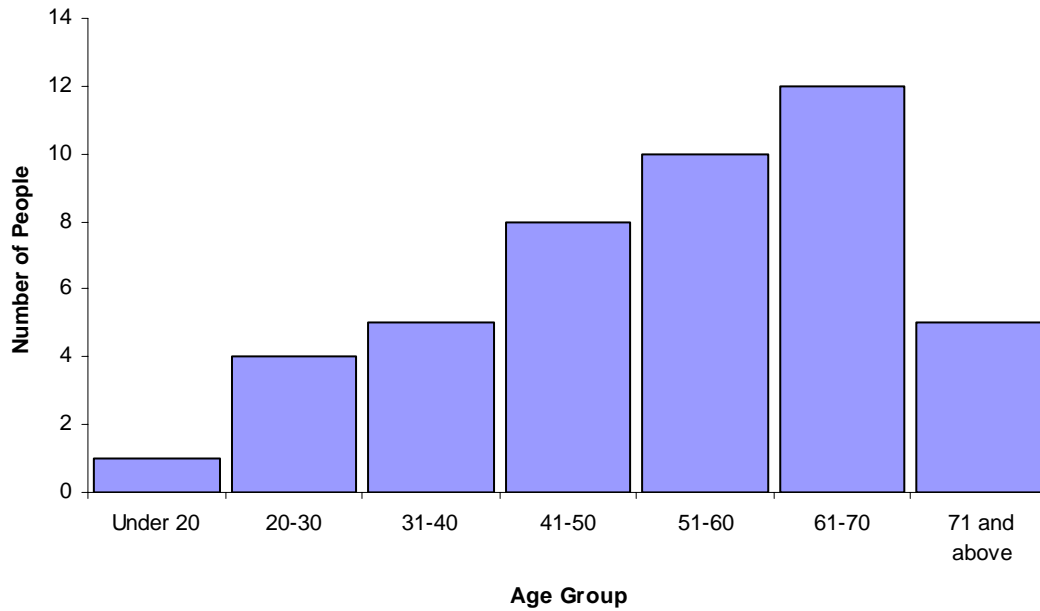
6 respondents had been born into Unitarian families



## Years Connected with Essex Church



## Age Profile of Respondents



In response to question two which asked *'Do you consider yourself to be a Unitarian? If not, how would you describe your world-view?'*

35 respondents replied YES they did consider themselves to be Unitarians.

But I had not framed the question clearly and not everybody had answered with a straight 'yes' or 'no'. People's descriptions of their world-views gave an inkling of the rich and varied responses that characterised the questionnaires as a whole. For example:

- *An optimistic atheist*
- *Pagan / animistic*
- *I dislike tight labels*
- *A Christian Unitarian, I prefer that order rather than the other way round*
- *I would say I attend a Unitarian church and like its approach and services*
- *I think of myself as a Unitarian Universalist with fluctuating beliefs about a Godhead*

In starting to analyse the responses to this question I had dived into uncharted waters – the result of asking open questions in a questionnaire.

## Data Analysis and Interpretation

### Believing in a Unitarian Congregation

*"I believe in this congregation if that makes any sense to you."* (Q.45)

In an interesting recent article Unitarian London District minister David Usher put forward the view that it was a mistake for Unitarians to describe themselves by their beliefs since "being a Unitarian today is not about having the right belief; it is about having an authentic faith" (2008, p.4). Whilst this is theologically correct in a non-creedal denomination, in my daily working life as a Unitarian minister I notice people's eagerness to explore their religious and spiritual beliefs. Providing opportunities in small groups for people to make such explorations has become one of the hallmarks of Unitarian religious education activity, with courses such as *Building Your Own Theology* (Gilbert, 2000).

The questionnaire asked people to describe their 'religious and spiritual beliefs, values or world-view', a wording suggested in one of the focus groups when someone said "but I don't believe in anything", meaning a divinity (group notes, 2008). When asked what was important to her, she was able to articulate a great deal about the importance of ethical behaviour and the links she perceived between all living beings. I was struck when first reading through the completed questionnaires by the level of theological sophistication some people demonstrated in their responses, comfortable in using terms such as theist, pantheist, panentheist, Godhead, deity, creation spirituality, immanence and transcendence. Some respondents showed awareness of current debates with regard to religion and science, mentioning the work of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens and recent studies of consciousness. Such responses are understandable given the levels of educational attainment within the congregation, where I estimate that two thirds of those completing questionnaires have been educated at least to first degree level.

It was interesting to observe how often congregation members referred to their beliefs as spiritual rather than religious and how their beliefs echoed Heelas' and Woodward's thesis of 'subjective-life', where "the subjectivities of each individual become a, if not the, unique source of significance, meaning and authority" (2005, pp. 3-4). Diarmuid O' Murchu differentiates between spirituality and religion by pointing out that spirituality is at least 70,000 years old, while more formal religious systems began only 4,500 years ago (1998, vii) and this idea is developed by Marie McCarthy when she describes spirituality as "broader and more encompassing than any religion. It is an expression of one's deepest values and commitments, one's sense or experience of something larger than and beyond oneself" (2000, p. 196). Paul Heelas, on the other hand, emphasises that the key characteristics that have come to be associated with spirituality are that it is personal and linked with that which is interior or immanent, that it is the way one experiences a relationship with the sacred and knowledge or experience that is gained from that relationship. "At heart, spirituality comes to mean 'life' ... thus contemporary spirituality may more precisely be termed 'spirituality of life'" (Woodward & Pattison 2002, p.258-259).

I find myself humming a favourite song in Unitarian circles, introduced to us by American Unitarian Universalists, which begins,

"Spirit of life, come unto me  
Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion  
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea,  
Move in the hand giving life the shape of justice." (McDade, 1993 in Singing The Living Tradition).

The fact that in only three questionnaires was a clear and unequivocal belief in God stated raised interesting questions about my congregation's use of religious language. It reminded me of an encounter after worship one Sunday, when I had only been in post for a few months. A committee member commented, "My goodness Sarah, you've certainly been getting us to sing lots of hymns with God in since you arrived" (journal 2005). As my confidence as a minister has grown I have been able to joke about this congregation's sometimes allergic type reaction, both to God and to Christianity. I am not the only one to have noticed it.

*"I understand that Unitarianism is from the Christian tradition but it bemuses me why we never mention Jesus or the Bible as we seem to mention every other faith". (Q.21)*

*"I have found Essex Church relaxing and comforting ... but I would not want to have such a 'vague' faith in the future."* (Q.3)

Yet other respondents seem more able to embrace such uncertainty in their faith; *"I believe myself to be a Theist with a quite strong sense of a personal relationship with an other but not too sure what the other is."* (Q14) or to assert their own beliefs, *"I think of myself as a voice for the non-atheists / not strictly rational amongst our ranks!"* (Q15)

Again and again, people write of an inner authority, a higher power within, a sense of connectedness with all that is, a higher self, a search for the divine within, a life force connecting all that exists. Several mention mysticism in describing their faith yet others reflect the far more traditional Unitarian message of rationalism, a sort of religious humanism.

There is an awareness that a strong faith might be a comfort; *"most religions give people a firm structure with rules and beliefs, and although such certainty is tempting, I could never believe any of it to be true,"* (Q33) and a number of people describe themselves as agnostics or humanists who still value being part of a religious community.

*"Belonging to this church has allowed me to practice my humanism"* (Q29).

As minister to this group of people I wonder how best one might minister to such a diverse range of theologies. One answer comes in a touching comment from one of the few people who attend our worship who would describe themselves as a Christian. He explains that, *"I can silently include Christian bits in each service at Essex Church"* (Q44). May I always remember to include silences in worship, to make space for theologies other than the dominant one, to allow people room for their own beliefs rather than ever trying to impose my own.

I think back to the early days of my ministry training. As the only Unitarian in my year group in an ecumenical college, I wondered how, as a non-theist, I could engage with theological reflection, particularly in a group situation and

then realised with relief that I had been reflecting theologically for years, both on my own and in Unitarian religious education groups. Journaling is mentioned by a number of respondents as a spiritual practice they engage in. Some of the questionnaire responses in themselves are examples of Graham, Walton and Ward's method of theological reflection, 'Theology By Heart', which "looks to the self and the interior life as the primary space in which theological awareness is generated and nurtured" (2005, p.18). The individual's inner experience is transformed through a writing process into what the authors describe as a 'living human document' which is in essence a dialogue between the self, other people and other world views and with that which they call God (p.18). They give useful explanations of two key words, reflexivity and reflection, defining reflexivity as "an acknowledgement of the significance of the self in forming an understanding of the world" whereas in reflection "the focus is more upon what can be seen by looking outwards to what lies beyond the limits of the personal" (2005, p.19). Several respondents delve deeply into their inner experiences in describing their faith journey, particularly when explaining the part that a crisis has played in their faith development or their move away from more restrictive religious movements. Three people emailed me corrections to their questionnaire answers, which they had wanted to change after reflecting upon them and more than one person mentioned the pleasure, as well as the effort, of responding to the questions. In writing their answers people have indeed been creating 'living human documents', which give a glimpse of their faith as a work in progress, provisional, open to question and change, yet still a source of both comfort and curiosity. Generally these seem to be people who do not find uncertainty unbearable.

## A True Community?

The questions about belonging on the questionnaire – ‘what does it mean to you to belong to Essex Church?’ and ‘what are the most important things you gain from belonging to Essex Church?’ are phrased, I realised with hindsight, in such a way that only a thoroughly disgruntled respondent would be likely to answer negatively. Yet for me as a minister it is still a moving experience to read people’s responses to these questions. Some responses could be found in a text book on communities: *“As humans we need community, for existence we need a sense of meaning, and we get meaning through ritual and symbolism. Being a member of Essex Church enriches my life ... it helps me focus on what’s important in an increasingly complicated modern world”* (Q8, 2008). These words echo the view of Emile Durkheim, one of the earliest sociologists, who saw religion as “essentially social, uniting its adherents into a ‘single moral community” (Aldridge 200, p.26).

Yet this respondent, by mentioning ‘an increasingly complicated modern world’ is also demonstrating an awareness that in our modern and indeed post-modern world, community may not always be a straight-forward concept. Those who attend Essex Church do not live nearby. This is not a traditional parish church serving a local area. A better description is that of the ‘gathered church’, where people attend out of choice, sometimes travelling from a considerable distance. Mathew Guest writing in *Studying Local Churches: A Handbook* compares gathered churches with parish churches, the latter primarily aiming to serve their localities, whilst the former aim to meet the needs of their members (Cameron 2005 p.105). At Essex Church the emphasis is upon serving the congregation’s members and those who attend worship on Sunday mornings, without whom the church would not exist. “For the most part, gathered congregations rely on the active commitment of their members for their very existence” writes Davie (1994 p.63). Members and attendees are making an active choice to be here on a Sunday morning. Once again the theme of commitment emerges.

Sociologists have described the “gradual emergence of an ethic of consumption rather than one of obligation” throughout social life, especially

amongst the young (Davie 2005, p.284) and I wonder if this is evident within this religious community. I go back to the questionnaires to see if there is any correlation between length of membership or age group and a sense of responsibility or a desire to consume more than to give back to the church, but there does not seem to be a strong link. Someone who has joined in the last three years writes that *"I am a member – mostly because I feel it is important that I am there and I hope that energy / intention / and desire adds to the greater congregation positively as it does for me"* (Q7, 2008). She lists the tasks she has taken on. Some longstanding members explain why they are now taking a less active part in congregational life. I think back to various committee meetings where we have discussed the need to find new trustees and ways to encourage people to become more actively involved in running the congregation and its building. It reminds me of the influential work of Robert Putnam tracing the decline of associational activity in America, entitled *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2000), a process which has been matched by a similar decline in civic engagement within British society. Davie's article (2002), written in response to Bruce's wryly titled, *'Praying alone. Church-going in Britain and the Putnam Thesis'*, notes that it is voluntary organisations that have some sort of dedication to the wider public interest "exemplified above all by political parties, trade unions, and churches – which have experienced the greatest decline in recent years" with only the relatively new example of the environmental movement showing an increase of membership (Davie, 2002, p.331). Davie mentions the work of Helen Cameron and notes that, "Cameron concludes that it is the groups most closely associated with the generation of social capital (whether secular or religious) that are currently in decline" (Davie, 2002 p.332). Social capital refers to the sense of trust and reciprocity that is found in a community and I wonder how we as a church community could develop deeper levels of trust and helpfulness. I think with gratitude of the people who will ring someone if they do not appear at church on a Sunday morning and I reflect on the number of church members who live alone and on their particular needs, so rarely expressed to me.



The importance of a sense of community when living in this busy capital city of London is mentioned by a number of respondents:

*“It really is a point of reference for me here in London, a place where I can be accepted and supported. It gives me a sense of community. I am out of London quite a lot so miss a lot and I wish I felt a greater sense of community - are we not all looking for that too? A place where we are confirmed about who we are – just as we are. ... I think Essex Church has that as a goal.”* (Q.24)

*“London can be a soul-less place, and Essex Church has often provided my soul.”* (Q40)

The congregation is described by one person as *“an antidote to loneliness”* (Q6) yet for another,

*“It gives me food for thought and is a good place to be, but I question its validity as a true community in the fullest sense for me sometimes. ... Living in a large metropolitan city there is often a sense of lost community with neighbours who do not speak the same language”* (Q34).

This questioning was taken further by someone who left the church angrily in 2007. His words stung me and I wrote them down.

*“You go on and on about Essex Church being a community but no-one seems to want to talk to me when I ring them up and I haven’t been invited to anyone’s house once – not once – in three years. That’s not my idea of a community”* (journal, 2007).

I have watched myself and my congregation welcoming newcomers each week. We are kind but wary with people who seem different. Not surprisingly, the people who return and who choose to become members are often very similar to the people already here. With those who have mental health issues, learning difficulties, or who are from other cultures – we are friendly, but is our welcome sufficiently warm and open-hearted and accepting? Yet by those who do ‘fit in’, the congregation is described as *“a safe place and a loving place”* (Q14).

*“It has reawakened my feelings of a sense of community and belonging”* (Q19).

*“I love the people who attend and the way they interact. It is a loving place”* (Q28).

Unitarians are proud nationally of their record in embracing diversity – the first English denomination to ordain women, making an early commitment to

sexual and racial equality, at the forefront in offering same sex union blessing ceremonies and inter-faith marriages (Chryssides, 1998 pp. 92,112-113), yet Chryssides notes in his book *The Elements of Unitarianism* that in truth our congregations continue to be limited in the groups they appeal to, primarily white, middle class, middle age, intellectuals (1998, p. 108).

Many people mention the importance of relatedness within the church community and the value of belonging:

*“As a community, the image I have of a church like ours is that it works like an emotional bank account. You pay in small amounts by offering sympathy, caring and occasionally joy when people bring their own experiences. In return, you can withdraw sums of sympathy, caring and joy when needed. But unlike a conventional bank account, it is possible to do nothing but withdraw for a long time if necessary. Other people will keep toping up your account until you are ready to take over again” (Q23).*

*“Being at Kensington Unitarians meets my need to be an individual with my unique experience and to be welcomed into ‘the group’. The bond is of being different I suppose. At Kensington Unitarians I’m with people who have also chosen an ‘odd’ path so it’s very normalising to be here” (Q 32).*

*“I think over the years I have developed a familiarity with a group of people who have helped me develop a sense of belonging, though I am not a normal joiner of anything” (Q22).*

*“I value a community that is separate from the other circles that I move in, at home, at work, at the children’s school etc. It is refreshing” (Q36).*

Each Sunday as I look at the gathered people attending worship from the privileged position at the reading desk, I am ‘reading’ the group before me. I note the newcomers, I note where people sit and who they give a smile of recognition and welcome to. Having been given the further privilege of reading 45 questionnaires I make a commitment of my own to explore with this community how we can extend our welcome to the *other*, to the one who is different from us. This is the *corporate theological reflection* described by Graham, Walton and Ward where a congregation “construct(s) a sense of corporate identity through the use of a central metaphor or symbolic practices such as prayer, working or eating together, or by creating a narrative that tells the story of its on-going life” (2005, p.109). No community will appeal to everyone or meet everyone’s needs but what we have here is valued:

A member for over 30 years writes of the church as a friendship and support group where *“even though the members may change there is always a community to turn to”* (Q10).

A number of people describe the church as a ‘safe space’, a ‘sort of spiritual home’, *“a warm and welcoming place in which I am allowed to have my own views (and voice them)”* (Q21).

*“There is a sense of being ‘carried’ or held by this community. When I joined I had to face a lot of changes in my life, something which was very unsettling. I don’t think I would have coped in the same way without the people here”* (Q13).

From a starting point in which I intended to build up a case study, create a picture of this community, I realise that nothing is static. I am scribbling notes about future possibilities; this research process is becoming action research. I had not chosen to engage in action research because I had no sense that there was anything wrong that needed to be fixed. We were not seeking solutions to problems. But just as my congregation members’ beliefs seem far from static so too is this research, and its possible outcomes. There is no end point to reach, no completion point, but rather an on-going faith journey – a metaphor of travel that kept appearing at different points in the assembled data.

## **The Journey of Life**

The central metaphor that emerged in a number of questionnaires was the description of life and the spiritual path as a journey, hardly surprising perhaps since this is a terminology found on our leaflets and website (App. C).

*“The best part of being a Unitarian is that my faith can keep growing and changing, it can and will be truly authentic to me and my journey” (Q.7).*

*“I believe that religion is a journey, not a destination, and so it is unwise to have very firm or fixed views at any one time. I do not believe that religious truth has been revealed for all time, rather that each generation has new insights to give, new truths to reveal” (Q.40).*

*“Essex Church provides me with a community of fellow seekers that encourages me to explore my spiritual journey” (Q14).*

*“I see myself as someone on a spiritual path” (Q.42).*

*“Belonging to Essex Church means that I have a spiritual home where I can nurture my spiritual path with like-minded people i.e. liberals not fanatics. I am amazed that such a place could actually exist” (Q. 9).*

*I like the idea of God as a process and I like the idea of my life as ‘becoming’ (Q.43).*

No wonder I enjoy ministry in this setting. Life as a journey is a key image in my own life. I am aware of the possibilities such an image holds but also of its potential problems. Much has been written of the “postmodern spirit of *bricolage* – enquiry which proceeds by piecing together fragments” (Graham, 2000 p.106) and this term is also used to refer to the ‘pick-‘n’ mix’ nature of some people’s approach to religion today. This is generally viewed as a negative feature of the ‘New Age’, again a term that can be used dismissively. Heelas suggests the use of the term “expressive spirituality” instead (2000, p.250), but however this aspect of modern life is described, it is an issue for modern ministry. At a meeting of London ministry colleagues we all expressed some concern at the way people could attend our churches for a

few years, often with considerable enthusiasm, and even become involved in managing the community, only for them to move on elsewhere (journal, 2006). A creative writer, and a member of two Unitarian congregations for many years, expresses this in a new way for me:

*“For me Unitarianism is more of a lake, which attracts birds and creatures of many species to come together for refreshment and enables them to be together in ways which without it they might not do!” (Q. 31)*

I am left with an image of an oasis, a place of rest and refreshment amidst a challenging terrain. An oasis welcomes travellers and makes them comfortable. People fill up their water bottles; camels take a long, cool drink. Supplies are replenished and the journey is then re-commenced. Travellers by their very nature *travel*, just as migrating birds must leave in the winter time and return again in the spring. Yet there must also be people who live and work at the oasis, the stopping place, people who tend to the needs of those who pass through. As a religious community we care about people and hope to meet their needs. Perhaps it is time to relax and accept that the role of the ones who stay within a community is not only to tend to our own needs but to provide spiritual refreshment for those who are travelling onwards. I look afresh at respondents who have expressed this sense of one who will not stay for long and I wonder if we can improve our levels of hospitality to these travellers:

*“I feel resistant to the notion of ‘belonging’ to a church at present. Essex Church is a place where I can fit in for now” (Q3).*

How too can we better advertise our existence and the sacred experience we hope to offer both in worship and in small group activities? I smile at one person’s description of how they *“keep thinking of the unfortunate people who think Sunday morning is for hustling round B&Q buying tiles instead of sitting in a quiet, sunny space listening to beautiful music” (Q 11).*

Another aspect of this journeying theme emerges. People describe their lives in terms of personal as well as spiritual development and explain that belonging to this church has helped them to develop their confidence and

skills, particularly through taking an active part in worship and taking on leadership roles in small groups and within the management structure. This is something that this congregation had worked actively on long before my arrival, holding regular, congregation-led services. We have run a worship group recently to assist more people in developing these skills.

*“My involvement here has made me more confident” (Q43).*

*“I have been encouraged in reading at the services and lately writing, which has been of enormous benefit to me” (Q12).*

*“I have untold opportunities (here) to try new things and experiment with new ideas – opportunities to try out my creative urges” (Q15).*

Perhaps when people stop at our oasis for spiritual refreshment and find that there are opportunities here for them, they will stay a little longer and some perhaps will make the oasis their spiritual home.

### **“Our Blue Boat Home”**

“I’ve been sailing all my life now,  
never harbour or port have I known.  
The wide universe is the ocean I travel  
And the earth is my blue boat home” (2006, words: Peter Mayer in *Singing The Journey*).

This verse is the chorus from one of the new hymns that we have been singing recently in worship. I had wondered about what it said about our community that we so like this rather lonely yet lyrical image – evocative perhaps of the spiritual journeys mentioned in the previous section. Then as I delved once more into the questionnaires, seeking themes and connections, I was struck by the number of times respondents mentioned environmental groups and concerns in response to being asked about ‘other groups, organisations, activities’ that are important to them or which they feel passionate about. This was matched by responses to the question that asked people about ‘things that you do, or have previously done, as an individual that you consider to be spiritual practices’. People are thoughtful about this.

*“It is hard to draw the line as to what is and isn’t a spiritual practice – for example, I see my work in economics in the context of Creation Spirituality etc. ideas (Q17).*

*“Anything done with love is a spiritual practice” (Q12).*

Many respondents mention the natural world as part of their spiritual practice – being in nature, supporting environmental causes, walking, swimming outside, hiking in wild places, gardening, watching birds, taking note of the passing of the seasons, sitting by campfires, sitting outside mindfully, hugging trees, lying on the earth and looking at the sky, enjoying city parks. These activities are nearly always carried out alone but there is no sense of loneliness in these responses.

The church building is rented to a wide range of groups. Local residents’ groups meet here, the local council holds mental health support group meetings here, a Sufi Muslim Zikr is held in the library on most Monday evening of the year. A liberal Jewish group, Beit Klal, has met in the church since it first opened in the 1970s, Seichno-no-le, a Brazilian / Japanese religious community that combines Buddhism and Christianity, meets here each Saturday night, a Buddhist meditation group and a Hindu chanting group are held here each week, the church hosts a community choir and a community arts project starts in the autumn. Yoga and tai chi classes are run here each week. The Inter-faith Seminary uses the church for its meetings, as do several healing groups. Some years ago the church treasurer happened also to be a well regarded hedge fund manager. Financially astute, he pointed out that the congregation would be better off if it ceased to rent out its space to groups, which necessitated employing a warden, and instead rented out the warden’s flat. This would reduce the wear and tear on the church and make life easier for the management committee. But the committee decided that providing meeting space for local groups was an important part of its ministry in the community, a decision made before my ministry began but one for which I am grateful. It means that literally hundreds of people come through the doors of this church each week and will hopefully leave with a positive view of Unitarianism. Congregation members are proud to share the

building in this way. One writes, *“I love our building and the fact that so many people are able to share it with us”* (Q2).

I had wondered if this congregation could be said to have a particular metaphor that expresses its theological stance and an image starts to emerge, or rather a shape. The hymn ‘blue, boat home’ imagines us sailing the universe on our globe. Our worship space is circular, with a rounded ceiling and round roof lights that bathe the space in light. Each Sunday we have a ritual known as candles of joy and concern, in which people are invited to come and light a candle and, if they wish, tell the congregation something of their joys and concerns. More than one person has mentioned to me that this is often the most moving part of worship for them. From the very first service I attended here I was struck by people’s willingness to express themselves in this ritual, the care and concern that is expressed, the thoughtful way in which people avoid taking up too much time or express themselves in ways that will help others to understand them. I am reminded of Clifford Geertz’s use of an image attributed to early sociologist Max Weber, that “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun” (quoted by Wolcott, 2001, p.70). Thinking of our worship circle I can imagine threads of connection between us, creating a weaving, a fabric that holds us all, a fabric that is open enough in its weave to allow other threads to join us. It is in the relationships of this community that theology emerges – relationships with one another, relationships of individuals to the community and also to themselves, relationships of people to their eclectic faiths, which are so expressively individualistic and yet shared because of that. We are a people who are journeying both individually and collectively and a circle and a web connect us. There is also a morality, an ethic of right living, in relationship to one another, to all of existence and to our planet earth. People here try to care and do not necessarily require an external sense of a deity in order to remember to care and to love.

*“Even if there is no God I want to live as if there is one”* (Q23) says one congregation member, and I agree.



Again I return to the idea of relationality, of our human yearning for connectedness. I think of the relationships in this community and of the problems and the joys that relatedness brings us. Quiet references are made in the questionnaires to previously difficult times in this church.

*“It is almost like a family (in the best sense) - even when times have been hard I couldn’t entirely give up on the place ... I kept hanging on in there, to try and make things right – and in recent times when I’ve been more needy it hasn’t given up on me either” (Q15).*

*“As we know the church has had a great many ups and downs over the years, some of them very difficult times, but it has a great core of loyalty, which has seen it through” (Q40).*

Once more, that sense of commitment is expressed.

Some people demonstrate their awareness that relatedness can take great effort, especially when the ‘going gets tough’.

*“Church is a place for commitment, perennially renewed commitment to the process of shared / emotional exploration – and then to face the challenge, of how to translate it into action. I try to engage with sturdy intimacy, (not always easy since it requires of us willingness to face conflicts, not always easy, when the inner driver ‘to be nice’ is still alive and well” (Q 6).*

### **A Rose Bowl and Some Angels’ Wings**

It was the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the opening of the present Essex Church building in 2007. A celebratory party and an anniversary service were planned. People looked for memorabilia; the archive cupboards were searched. A long-term member asked where Aunt Jessie’s rose bowl was kept, suggesting that we use it for a flower display, and I experienced a twinge of anxiety. “I’ve only been here 18 months. Why do I feel responsible for the church silver? Should I know who Aunt Jessie was?” (journal, 2007).

In searching for the rose bowl, which did eventually turn up at the back of the safe, I found two large, carved, wooden angels’ wings. Another member, who remembered the old church, told the story of the many angels that had adorned the walls of the worship space. When the church was demolished, she explains, homes were found for many items – a stained glass window went to a museum, the organ to another church, the pews went to the Unitarian chapel in Hampstead. One of the angels went to a church member

who, shortly afterwards, was burgled. The thieves stole the angel but left the wings behind and the upset member brought the wings back to the church where they have been kept in a cupboard ever since. Angel wings and a rose bowl. What imagery for a spiritual sanctuary.

French sociologist Danielle Hervieu-Leger, in her important work translated as *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (2000), writes of the way in which religious organisations continue to exist through the transmission of tradition from one generation to the next, which she describes as a chain of memory. When that chain is weakened or broken a religious tradition will eventually be lost and this, she says, will weaken the stability of society as a whole and the individuals within it.

“Deprived of the security of stable communities which supplied evidence of a code of meaning that was fixed once and for all, deprived too of the great Universalist visions imparted by modernist ideologies, individuals are adrift in a universe without fixed bearings” (p.165).

Does it matter for this community at Essex Church if nobody knows the stories of the rose bowl and the angel wings? As I look back over the data I have collected, I am struck by two opposing or possibly balancing elements – the sense of people on a journey, a spiritual quest which has brought them to this church but which at some point may move them on – and the repeated statements of safety in this community, a place to rest, a spiritual home. Perhaps our task as a spiritual community in these post-modern times is to accept the fluidity and restlessness of people’s lives and offer that oasis where some people will rest for a while and move on and some people will find a spiritual community where they choose to stay, tending to their own needs and the needs of those who are passing through. Hervieu-Leger argues that by placing an individual’s belief at the core rather than the beliefs of the institution, Christianity has been weakened (p.167). But for us as Unitarians perhaps there never was a central shared core of belief, perhaps we always have given “serious attention to the flexible nature of believing,” as Hervieu-Leger suggests is now essential for religious groups, (p.168).

But yes, I think it does matter that this congregation remembers some of its past and finds inventive ways to pass that on to new members. There may not be a clear religious tradition of belief to pass from one Unitarian generation to another but there are stories and images and a history that places this community within a wider context and reminds us that we are not alone nor existing in a vacuum.

### **What Comes Next**

Engaging in this shared process of research with my congregation has been an important experience for me as a minister and has provided a glimpse into the beliefs of many of my congregation members and their sense of belonging here at Essex Church. It has provided much food for thought and I am left with a list of ideas for ways forward, ways better to work within the congregation, issues for us to consider further together.

Several respondents mentioned the possibility of publishing people's accounts of 'believing and belonging'. *"I'm slightly envious that you're the only one who'll get to read it all!"* (Q15). Although that is not possible from the data collected, because of ethical issues, perhaps there are enough people who would be prepared to re-write their offerings for this new purpose.

I knew that our membership was growing but seeing the statistic that 18 people filling in the questionnaire had been members for three years or less has brought me back to Hervieu-Leger's image of church as a chain of memory (2000). How can we best assist these people to integrate in this church community, how can we all be open to the new ideas that they bring and how can we most healthily ensure the continuance of our tradition both within Essex Church and within our Unitarian denomination? An archiving project was already planned, a sorting of the cupboards where memories are stored. Can we make this an attractive project for some newcomers? Is there a way that the angel wings could be displayed and their story told?

I notice the importance of weekly worship for people's spiritual lives, their gratitude that there is something to come to when they want; that they are glad not to have to 'do' anything. Yet also there are people who value taking part and whose confidence and well-being have grown through this involvement. There is a creative tension between people's inner explorations and a desire to live good and ethical lives and make a difference in the world. We are providing plenty of opportunities for inner exploring. Are we sufficiently involved with social action activities? Many people are involved in a wide range of social justice causes outside the church but at present we do little more than the occasional financial collection for a worthy cause. Are there causes that we could become passionate about, causes that would channel our yearning to love and care for the *others* in our world?

## **Conclusion**

As I conclude this study I am grateful for the love that has been expressed through the collective act of writing about believing and belonging with this congregation. I have learnt much as a minister about the people I work with and for. There are new ideas of ways that we can further explore together, ways we may choose to express our faith and our faiths in the years ahead. For now, the cake plate is empty, only a few crumbs remain. But just as faith ever holds the possibility for renewal so can new cakes be baked, and eaten, on another day.

*"The services are a pleasure to listen to and very inclusive. And I love the cakes and tea afterwards."* (Q3)

