



Membership

We held our annual membership service on Sunday 29th January when the trustees collectively organised the service, with Paulette Reed leading it and John Stevens giving the address via Zoom. This service is an opportunity for current members of the Meeting House to re-confirm their commitment to support our community and our building as well as for new members to be formally welcomed.

Not everybody who is part of our congregation decides to commit to membership and that is a free personal choice, in line with our Unitarian principles. For those who are members, it may have a slightly different personal meaning for each of us. What it does give us all is a sense of belonging, of commitment to shared values, an entitlement to vote on important congregational matters (e.g. the choice of a Minister), to question the trustees about financial and management decisions and to stand as a trustee.

Contents

- 1 – Membership
- 2 & 3 – Membership Service Address
- 4 - Membership Service Address, continued; Services in February
- 5 – Observation; Poetry Group; Book Group; Birthdays; Recycling; Suffolk Refugee Support Sewing Group
- 6 – Elsa – Lighthouse
- 7 – Suffolk Sight; Moments Coffee Shop; Suffolk Pride; Contacts; Thought for the Month

As members we commit to giving a regular financial contribution to the Meeting House – one we ourselves decide upon. All costs are currently increasing so we invite those who are able to review the amount they give and if possible to increase it. We are also grateful for the other practical contributions from members and attenders which support our community and our building.

After the membership service we held one of our traditional shared lunches where we all bring food or another contribution and share it amid good conversation about anything and everything. It is also a chance to get to know one another even better. There is always plenty of food and Maggie Hodges took this photo of Paulette Reed finishing up a selection of deserts ...



Membership Service Address

Good morning everyone. The fact that I join you virtually for this celebration of our membership, rather than in person, is perhaps fitting. Whilst my fellow trustees are with you in the meeting hall, I am speaking to you from sunny south-east London, from the same room where I now do much of my work.

For so much is 'hybrid' these days – work, home life, and now our services. A curious mix of being present but not present at the same time. Whilst this may not suit some, undoubtedly for others it provides benefits (certainly I personally am able to attend many more services now than I would have been able to in the past). And if there is any faith group that should be able to cope with change, with uncertainty, it's ours!

In talking about membership I should start by briefly describing my own path here. My first experience of Unitarianism, or at least the principles that underpin it, came through reading the Evening Star newspaper (no longer with us) in the late 1990s – more specifically the letter pages where this chap called Cliff Reed would occasionally send in contributions which made a lot more sense than the usual missives, commenting on current affairs in a way which showed compassion and thought. Letters which made you think *"they've got something to say there"*.

It was these letters, and comments from a few enlightened friends, that caused me to tentatively stick my head around the door – over 20 years ago. Since then I have barely lived in Ipswich. But the Ipswich congregation holds a special place in my heart, and always will. And I want more people to experience it, so that this congregation thrives and spreads joy and peace for generations to come.

Two quotes occurred to me as I considered

'membership', and what it means to us. The first, the famous Groucho Marx quote *"I wouldn't belong to any club that would have me as a member"*. Well that certainly does not apply here – we welcome all, and any of the Marx brothers would be welcome here, Groucho, Harpo, maybe not so much Karl. Then again Karl Marx's views on organised religion may well chime with some of ours!

The other quote that occurred is by that adopted son of our Town, the late Sir Bobby Robson, manager of Ipswich Town football club throughout the glory years of the 1970s. Sorry, how predictable of me to bring it back to football, but there are, I feel, some real similarities between the sense of devotion and collective experience that unites fans of a club and members of a congregation. What Sir Bobby said, an abridged version of which is written on the wall at the Portman Road stadium, a stone's throw from where you are all sitting, is thus:

"What is a club in any case? Not the buildings or the directors or the people who are paid to represent it. It's the noise, the passion, the feeling of belonging, the pride in your city."

Now I'm not going to try to argue that the experiences are the same. If anything, the blind loyalty of football, the noise, the tribalism is in many cases the absolute antithesis of what brings us here. But that sense of reducing something which has been complicated to a simple devotion, shared with a collective, and in many cases shared with people who have gone before us and those that will come after is there. That sense of belonging to something bigger than ourselves, and supporting each other.

We earlier reaffirmed our commitment as members of this congregation, in doing so acknowledging that *"gathering for centuries seeking a higher purpose and deeper life than they could find alone.... you have decided to make a commitment to this faith community."* But what is this faith community?

Membership Service Address – cont.

Why are we here?

To support each other certainly, but how do we look to support other groups outside our own?

We actively support local charities and do welcome the community into our meeting hall throughout the year. We have a responsibility to encourage new members but also to widen the circle of our influence by building relationships with the other faith communities in Ipswich - the Christian churches, the synagogues, the Sikh and Hindu temples, the mosques. Living as we do in a multi-ethnic and multi-faith community, we might ask what we can do to make the Unitarian Meeting House feel like a spiritual 'home' for all?

I mentioned change earlier. Change is constant, and something we need to embrace. It's not easy of course - and there is nothing wrong in taking comfort in the familiar. At its best our traditions link us to those free of mind and spirit who have come before us, and root us in a shared sense of origin. If not careful however tradition can result in routine, a dullness of the intellect, a lack of the vital flame of spirit that is so essential to our faith.

Over the past few years as members of this congregation we've got used to change. A period of three ministers in relatively quick succession, and more recently a peripatetic leadership of services veering from the sublime (last week) to the ridiculous (chancers like me). In some cases a multiplicity of viewpoints and styles can bring fresh energy into a congregation, provoke thought and stimulate a more inquiring faith. The format of our services has remained relatively consistent, and that is something which perhaps can be re-considered in the future – and looking forward we need to be ready to make changes, if that is what is required to attract new members, and ensure we are a living faith.

It seems likely to me however that the lack of a regular minister will have an impact on the growth of membership of a congregation and its place

within, and impact on, the local community. I come back to the reasons why I first came here 25 years ago, when I became aware of what Unitarianism actually was.

But we cannot rely on a minister to create that awareness. It's down to us, as members, to make people aware of this special thing we enjoy, that we create.

How good are we at promoting what we have here? Do we take every opportunity to tell people – friends, colleagues, strangers – about the existence of the Meeting House and what Unitarianism is? When people come to an open day, even those who have lived in Ipswich most or all of their lives – or worked in the area – often they say '*I didn't know what this building was*' – let alone knowing what Unitarianism is. Even churches and church organisations don't know. We get mixed up with the Quakers and United Reformed churches ... so it's up to us to tell people that we exist.

'Evangelical Unitarianism' - it's a bit of a contradiction in terms, but it's kind of what we need. The etymology of the word "Evangelical" is explicitly Christian – derived from the Greek "*good news*" – "*eu-angelion*" - (and God knows right now in the world it feels like we need some good news!). But in its modern sense 'evangelism has clearly entered the lexicon to mean more than simply spreading the "*good news*" of the gospel, but now can be understood, to quote the Collins dictionary, as simply an "*ardent or missionary zeal for a cause*".

Now I am not proposing that we get together in pairs and start knocking on doors – which reminds me of the joke "*what do you get when you cross a Unitarian with a Jehovah's Witness? - someone who knocks on your door to find out about your religion*"

Membership Service Address – cont.

But maybe we can learn a little from the more charismatic Christian church. Not their hypocritical didactic certainty, or their intolerance of deviation from some fairly arbitrary rules about who you can marry and so on. But there is a reason why membership of those sorts of church are growing in this country.

Personally I've experienced the genuinely welcoming nature of the reception that you get at many evangelical Christian churches. Right now there is a new(ish) Christian church, set up in the old Odeon cinema, with Hope emblazoned across its wall, that's attracting hundreds of worshippers. Contrast that with the noticeboard outside our own Meeting Hall. It looks fabulous, in its heritage colours. But does it bring people in?

Hope Church has a number of full-time employees, some purely focussed on marketing the church, with a lively presence on social media. Despite the best efforts of some in our congregation we currently have a small presence.

It's fair to say that our product is harder to sell. We can't offer a simplistic set of rules, a guide to explaining everything so that you don't have to think. In this changing, uncertain world, certainty sells. But is our diverse liberal viewpoint not, to use some marketing jargon, our USP = our unique selling point?

In a fractured, uncertain and polarised world, where short-term materialistic impulses dominate public policy and discourse alike, there has never been a greater need for a community which seeks to show tolerance and provide a calm space for contemplation. The fact that we are welcoming to all, that you can express your personal interpretation of faith, that you can choose to worship what you might call God (or might not), with the support of like-minded people is a precious thing. That you can engage with some of the tradition, the ritual, of organised religion – but

without having your personal views squashed or judged – that is a precious thing. Something which some of our forebears died for.

Our reasons for meeting here are multiple – people will be here for company, a sense of community, stimulating thought, the calming routine of ritual, and a chance to consider that which lies beyond our immediate perception.

Our reasons for membership are likewise. For me membership should fundamentally allow us authenticity - the ability to be ourselves, without shame. Membership of a group that supports us in who we are, and yet challenges us to think about who we want to be, as we make our individual journeys of faith. We all seek different things, and sometimes, some services, we get those things. Sometimes maybe we don't. But it's a safe bet that just by being here, by being members of this congregation, you're helping some people.

We light a flame at the start of our service and extinguish it as we depart. But the reality is that it keeps burning and it is us, it is you, that keeps it going. The flame of truth, of inquiry, of justice, of love will not be extinguished as long as we continue to share it. May it ever be so.

John Stevens

Services in February

5th - Lizzie Kingston Harris -

Framlingham Unitarians and GA Congregational Connections Lead. We welcome Edinburgh Unitarians who will be joining us on Zoom.

12th - Margaret Robinson, Stockton Unitarians.
(joining us via Zoom)

19th - Linda King, Ipswich Unitarians

26th - Rev. Cliff Reed, Minister Emeritus, Ipswich.
Communion will follow the service.

Observation



This church is in the small village of El Pilon near Bijagua in Costa Rica. It is a Catholic Church and services are held here every week. When we visited the area we were told that between 55 and 65% of all Costa Ricans are Catholic. The rest are 'Christian' (!). We understand that 'Christian' means an evangelical approach which is attracting ever more followers.

Beside the church is another building used as a clinic – a doctor visits twice a month.

Tessa and David Forsdike

Poetry Group

John O'Donohue's work gave us a rich seam to mine when we met in January. Next time (23rd February) we'll be looking at the poetry of Sharon Black. If you'd like to join us, contact Riena on 01473 210064 - or mjack76748@aol.com for more information.

Book Group

The Book Group next meets on Tuesday 14th March at 7pm via Zoom. We are reading and will discuss the new book by Barbara Kingsolver – Demon Copperhead. Contact Tessa for the link – tessa@tessajordan.co.uk All welcome.

Birthdays in February

Happy birthday to Jean Odell on 1st; Robert Waller on 2nd; Ali Mercer on 3rd; Kate Dickinson, Matilda Forsdike and Rachel Hamilton on 5th; Tracy Sakals on 11th; Linda King on 14th; Beryl Beech on 16th; Ralph Spence on 19th; Tessa Forsdike on 20th; and John Ellis on either 28th or 1st March as there is no 29th February this year.

Recycling

We have found a new charity home for clean plastic milk bottle tops, so please bring them to the Meeting House again.

Linda King also collects used stamps (cut from the envelopes) for the local Hospice.

The local Council also have a recycling option for used plastic and aluminium coffee pods. You sign up for the scheme and receive a special collection bag – here are the details - <https://www.ipswich.gov.uk/podback>

Suffolk Refugee Support Sewing Group

Until 17 March 2023, visitors to Christchurch Mansion will be able to see a colourful display of clothing created by Suffolk Refugee Support's sewing group. Items on display include Tudor inspired dresses and celebration clothing as well as crochet toys. The sewing group has created amazing things all from donated fabrics, wool and thread using sewing machines to transform into items inspired by Ipswich Museums' costume collections.

Elsa: Emotional Literacy and the Lighthouse Women's Community Centre

In early January, Tessa and I had the opportunity to meet with Deb Johnson, Business Co-ordinator of the *Lighthouse Women's Aid Charity* (that we've supported over the last two years) and visit the charity's newly renovated *Women's Community Centre* on Felixstowe Road, Ipswich. Deb was keen to show us around the spacious new premises that include several advice or counselling rooms, a group session space, a room dedicated to children's activities, a kitchen where basic care supplies are also available for women to pick up, and a large and sheltered back garden where children can play safely. Each of the spaces is welcomingly luminous and cheerful, with large windows and patio doors opening onto the garden. And it's easy to see how the spaces create a sense of peace and calm for women and children recovering from abusive domestic situations.

As we toured the Centre, Deb introduced us to the extensive range of services and programmes that Lighthouse offers for women and children. *Power to Change* is a 12-week course to support women in developing self-confidence and assertiveness once they've left an abusive relationship. *Who's in Charge* supports parents and carers who have children who use abusive or violent behaviour. *Expect Respect* is a toolkit for use in schools with 5 – 18 year olds offering interactive lesson plans that educate young people in the differences between healthy and abusive relationships and will be part of the PSHE curriculum in schools. These are just a few of the programmes and services offered.

And now the Centre offers *ELSA* (Emotional Literacy Support Assistant) support for children and young people. It cannot be coincidence that the acronym, Elsa, recalls the name of the adolescent character in Disney's 2013 blockbuster animated film, *Frozen*. At the start of the film, Elsa lives paralyzed in fear and shame because she is afraid of the destructive powers of her emotions. As elder

sister, she's taught 'Conceal don't feel,' in contrast to her ebullient and joyful younger sister, Anna. Only when Elsa learns to 'Let it [shame and fear] go,' as the lyrics of the film's song tell us, is she able to build a healthy relationship with her own emotions, a loving relationship with her younger sister, Anna and healthy connections with others.

As if Elsa's fictional life lesson were inspiration, The *Lighthouse's* ELSA programme provides exactly the types of support that enable young people to become aware of their emotions, to identify them and understand the most effective ways to act on them as they learn to develop healthy relationships with their own emotions as well as with others in their lives.



Tessa and I communicated the Unitarian Meeting House commitment to continued support for the Lighthouse even though Suffolk Sight is our charity for 2023. Deb indicated that donations of kitchen equipment (e.g., spatulas, sets of 4 – 6 plates or bowls, can openers, new small electrical appliances) are always welcome.

And we can also help by setting up a Supporter account on www.thegivingmachine.co.uk/find-a-cause for online shopping. Whenever you make an online purchase, The Giving Machine converts the commissions provided by the retailers into donations for the designated charity.

Contact Info for The Lighthouse Women's Community Centre, 238 Felixstowe Road, Ipswich IP3 9AD. Tel: 01473 228270. Email: info@lighthousewas.org.uk. Website: www.lighthousewa.org.uk

By Liz Constable

Suffolk Sight - the charity we are focussing on in 2023, has been invited to contribute to a service later in the year when we will have a chance to learn more about their services and how we may be able to help alongside the fundraising.

Moments Coffee Shop

Work to create the new Moments Coffee Shop inside Ipswich Town Hall is well under way. Part of the St Elizabeth Hospice family, Moments will provide freshly made cakes, savoury snacks, plus hot and cold drinks to support the charity's work providing end of life care for the local community. The team are now looking for volunteers to join them to work at the new venue, so if you have a few hours a week to help or want some work experience for your CV please do get in touch with the Council or the Hospice.

Suffolk Pride

Join us at The Hold on Fore Street, home to the Suffolk Archives, for their LGBTQ+ History Month Special late from 7pm on Thursday 23rd February. Full details of the event will be announced nearer the date on our social media.



Disclaimer

We welcome contributions from all members and friends of our congregation. Views expressed in the articles are those of the individual and not necessarily those of our congregation or of our Unitarian community.

Contacts

Contributions PLEASE for the next newsletter to Tessa before the deadline of Friday 24th February by email to ipswichunitarian@gmail.com or post to 48 Crabbe Street, Ipswich IP4 5HS
To contact our Secretary, ring 01473 728498 email tessa@tessajordan.co.uk
Website – www.unitarianipswich.com

Thought for the month

A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.
Albert Einstein