



Kensington Unitarians

The Newsletter

February 2008

What's On at Essex Church

Sunday 3rd February, 11.00am
"No Pain? No Gain?"
Led by Rev. Sarah Tinker

Monday 4th February, 7.00-9.00pm
Kensington Community Singers

Tuesday 5th February, 7.00-9.00pm
Science and Religion Group:
"Cosmology" with Will Lyons

Thursday 7th February, 7.00-9.00pm
Adult RE: "The Quest" (1/8)
Closed group – pre-registering is essential!

Sunday 10th February, 11.00am
"21st Century Medical Ethics"
Led by Rev. Sarah Tinker

Sunday 10th February, 2.00-3.00pm
Nia Technique with Sonia Leite
Holistic Movement Class

Sunday 10th February, 3.30-5.00pm
"Songs and Silence for the Soul"

Monday 11th February, 7.00-9.00pm
Kensington Community Singers

Thursday 14th February, 7.00-9.00pm
Creativity Group: "Build a Bower"
Led by Rev. Simon John Barlow

Sunday 17th February, 11.00am
"Visiting St Valentine"
Led by Rev. Simon John Barlow

Monday 18th February, 7.00-9.00pm
Kensington Community Singers

Thursday 21st February, 7.00-9.00pm
Adult RE: "The Quest" (2/8)
Closed group – pre-registering is essential!

Sunday 24th February, 11.00am
"The 'Law' of Attraction?"
Led by Rev. Sarah Tinker

Monday 25th February, 7.00-9.00pm
Kensington Community Singers

Tuesday 26th February, 7.00-9.00pm
Management Committee Meeting

Thursday 28th February, 7.00-9.00pm
Reading Group: 'Year of Wonders'
Book by Geraldine Brooks

A Message from Our Minister...

Unique and Unrepeatable You

Years ago I worked on a project designed to develop young people's self esteem. The project would end with a party and we would sing to one another:

**"You're unique and unrepeatable
That's why we like you."**



To take it in turns to sit in the middle of a circle and have twenty people sing those words to us was a moving experience and I have never forgotten how hard it was for many of us to sit quietly and let those words of affirmation sink in. But the message did sink in and has stayed with me ever since. It's a message of particular relevance in a church community I think because we are, and need to ensure that we continue to be, a diverse bunch of people. We have our interest in liberal Unitarian faith in common but our actual beliefs vary. Our congregation covers a spectrum of ages, economic situations, nationalities, sexual orientations and levels of education. Each of us has particular gifts that we bring to the world. Discovering these gifts and finding ways to use them is the work of a lifetime.

I wonder what it is that makes you 'unique and unrepeatable'? What do you offer the world that no-one else can bring? How can you be of service to yourself, to one another, to the communities to which you belong? Scientific discoveries about our DNA confirm the truth that there is nobody else quite like you, although I seem to recall some scientific concern that we held about 60% of our genetic material in common with fruit flies. Mind you, a fruit fly's ability to appear seemingly out of nowhere and to reproduce with such rapidity could be helpful in increasing the size of our congregation!

A church is a good place for people to explore what they can offer the world. Here at Essex Church we are fortunate that we can afford full time posts for a minister and warden, yet there is always more for volunteers to do. One of my aims for this year is to encourage as many people as possible to become more actively involved in our community and so I ask everyone to think what they enjoy, what they are good at, what skills they might like to develop. I also want to say a big thank you to everyone who does so much here already. Your support really is appreciated and makes a big difference. We are all indeed unique and unrepeatable, with only a passing resemblance to a fruit fly!

Rev. Sarah Tinker

In this Month's Newsletter...

** Fundraising News * Essex Church Membership Forms * News of our Advent Art and Craft Fair * Kensington Community Singers' First Performance * Creativity Group: "Build a Bower" with Simon John Barlow * Reading Group: "Year of Wonders" * "Seedy Sunday": Seed Swap & Shared Lunch * Multifaith Calendar * "Christmas at Othona" – article by Jo Ridgers * Ongoing "Science and Religion" Engagement Group * Theophilus Lindsey's Bicentenary * Essex Church Book Amnesty * Nia Technique – Regular Classes Begin * London District News * Bhakti Marga "Om Chanting" on Thursday nights * and much more!...*

Kensington Unitarians

At Essex Church (founded 1774), Notting Hill Gate

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.

We meet for worship each Sunday at 11.00am. The format of the service varies, and usually includes music, singing, meditation, an address, an opportunity to share joys and concerns, and a programme for children. Our activities also include religious education and spirituality workshops, engagement groups on a variety of themes, meeting for fellowship, a regular chanting session, and quiet meditation. All are welcome to come and join us.

Contact our minister to discuss our unique ceremonies, including child naming services, weddings, blessings, and memorials, which are available to all. Many other groups share our church building. If you are interested in hiring one of our rooms for your own organisation or event please contact our wardens by telephone or email.



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A New "Choir-for-All" Initiative at Essex Church

Kensington Community Singers

Monday Evenings from 7.00-9.00pm



We have recently launched a new community choir here at Essex Church. This choir is open to all – you don't need any qualifications except enthusiasm – and we're actively striving to welcome in local people alongside members of the congregation.

The sessions are great fun. Jen Hazel, our choir leader, has been teaching us a wide selection of songs from diverse sources. Donations to cover the cost of running the choir are invited (£3/£6/£9 per session – a sliding scale according to income). Contact Jen or Sarah to find out more.

Stewarding/Coffee Rotas



Stewarding:

3 rd February:	Howard Hague
10 th February:	Will Lyons
17 th February:	Angela Gasparetto
24 th February:	Christine Joshi

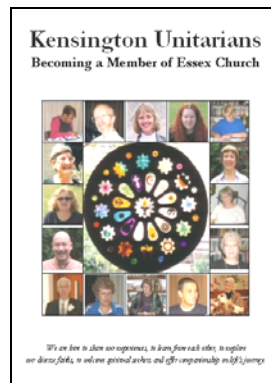
Coffee:

3 rd February:	Gill Hague
10 th February:	David Darling
17 th February:	Michaela von Britzke
24 th February:	Juliet Edwards

Please speak to Christine Joshi if you would be willing to help out with stewarding or coffee duties. This is a really easy way to get involved and help to support the life and work of our community.

Essex Church Membership Forms

This is a reminder that we hope to have everybody's completed membership forms back by the end of February so do please fill them in and hand them to our minister. If you would like to know more about membership do get in touch with our minister for a chat.



From the Essex Church
Management Committee

Songs and Silence for the Soul: Chanting and Singing at Essex Church



10th February, 9th March, 13th April
from 3.30 to 5.00pm

Suggested Donation: £2.00

An opportunity to sing chants from the world's faith traditions and to sit together in candlelit silence. All are welcome, no experience is necessary. A space in which to re-connect with yourself, one another and with whatever you hold to be divine.

Nia Technique

Holistic Movement Sessions:

Sessions led by Sonya Leite

Sunday 10th February, 2.00-3.00pm

Following the success of the introductory session back in January, a regular Nia class will be starting here at Essex Church, on the second Sunday of every month from 2-3pm (usually the same day as "Songs and Silence for the Soul"). The cost will be only £5.00 per session.

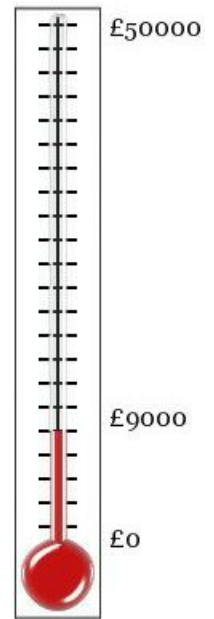
Nia is holistic movement for body and soul. It is an expressive movement practice promoting fitness, creativity and wellbeing. Fusing dance, yoga, tai chi and martial arts, Nia provides a holistic workout and leaves you feeling energised, relaxed and centred. It suits any level of fitness, age and experience, working from where you are now.

Nia's barefoot, grounded approach maximizes body efficiency and teaches you to move consciously in a gentler way. Dance movements are mixed with subtle therapeutic suggestions and visualization techniques that help you develop awareness and heighten sensation. The result is a fusion of movement styles that is incredibly free and liberating. Moving between simple choreography (form) and freedom of movement (freedance), Nia classes combine the grace and expressiveness of dance, the power and explosiveness of martial arts, and the wisdom and stillness of yoga and tai chi.

Fundraising News

We continue to be busy here at Essex Church raising money to make our building fully accessible. The Art and Craft Fair on December 2nd made a pleasing £1,169.25 (see the article from Jim Blair on page five).

Also in December we experimented with a Silent Auction. People offered their services for free and other people made bids for them. On offer were services such as singing lessons, portrait photographs, felt wall hangings, trips out, a week in Spain, computer assistance and – most popular of all – ironing and cleaning. Thanks to everyone for their Christmas cake orders – I made £155. At present the Disability access toilet building fund is at just over £9,200



In order to make the Silent Auction as financially successful as it was fun, we need to make sure that everyone makes arrangements to complete their tasks as soon as possible and to return the cheques, made payable to Essex Church, to me as Treasurer or to Sarah Tinker, our minister. I have already been given three cheques to deposit. I'm hoping we can reach £11,000 by the end of February.

I would like to thank everyone for all that they are doing to help with this fund-raising task. I know many people have worked hard to raise money this winter and have quietly made extra donations when they can. Thank you very much indeed for your generosity and enthusiasm.

Juliet Edwards, Treasurer



"What does it mean to have a spiritually mature relationship with money? One thing it means, certainly, is to face facts rather than denying or distorting them. Decision making about money does not lend itself to pat ethical formulas. Short of renouncing money for a life of poverty, we cannot escape the need to balance multiple, sometimes conflicting values... Each of us must find a balance between work and play, indulgence and self-denial, control and trust."

Dan Hotchkiss

Kensington Community Singers: First Performance!



The first public performance of the Kensington Community Singers burst forth in December. The group consists of twelve people, four from the church and eight from the broader community. The December debut was a great success, with both the congregation and the choir enjoying themselves - a sure formula for future happiness.

The polished performance included three songs which allowed the choir to demonstrate its range. The contributions were: 'Something Told the Wild Geese', 'Shalom Havayreem' and the toe tapping 'Lean on Me'. I had difficulty controlling my feet. At the end of the performance there was a vibrant energy in the room and a desire for more. At this point I reflected back to the group's first practice session some months earlier when I had quickly moved into the garden and turned on my personal music player to mask the sound. The choir had worked hard and developed into a joy.

Let's not forget to give a big thanks to Jen Hazel, the talented and determined choir leader, who got this project going and who manages to produce great sounds from once timid voices. Thanks too to Margaret Marshall who sings regularly in our Sunday choir and has been lifting our spirits in worship for many years now. Kensington Community Singers' soprano section was, by all accounts, glad to have Margaret with them to help hit those high notes.

I am very proud of Caroline's participation, and have noted that she is having great fun in the choir. There is an opening for new members, no classical training required. Where are those fine male voices hiding?

Jim Blair

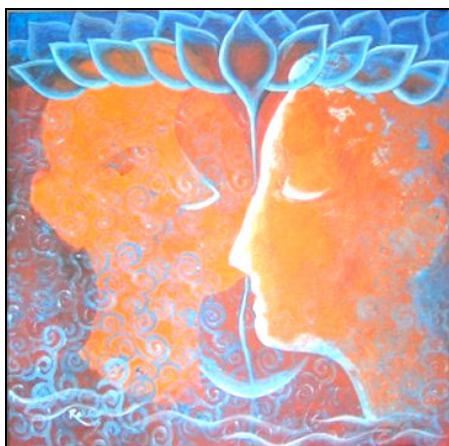
...a forthcoming event which you might be interested in: from the Art and Spirituality Network...

'Art from the Inner Light: Creating Art from the Dance of Life'

Saturday 8th March, 10 am – 4pm (arrivals from 9.30am)

At the London Interfaith Centre, 125 Salusbury Road, London NW6 6RG (Queen's Park)

"How can we connect to our creative source and move in the Light that gives us inspiration through our sorrows and joys?"



John Harley and Angela Schütz invite you to explore ways of getting in touch with your Inner Light using silence, meditation, movement / dance and art. There will be opportunities for getting out from your head and into your body, connecting with what moves you and expressing it creatively, working individually and making art together, sharing insights and experience. The day will involve some movement, but people of all levels of mobility are welcome. Please wear comfortable clothes and shoes that you don't mind getting messy.

Cost: £20 including art materials and drinks. Tea and coffee will be served from 9.30am. Bread and cheese will be provided for lunch; please bring something else to share.

Enquiries: on 020 7604 3053 or at info@londoninterfaith.org.uk



Advent Art and Craft Fair

Our third Advent Art and Craft fair, organised by the creativity group, again showed what a talented bunch of people we are here at Essex Church, selling such a variety of items professionally produced. This year's highlights were the florists shop full of felt flowers, the wide range of cards for all occasions, the new re-usable shopping bags with the Kensington Unitarians logo on - to mention just a few. Ploughman's lunches and mulled wine were offered to create a festive atmosphere. My only disappointment was in going back for a second piece of Michaela's stollen, an essential precursor to getting a third piece, only to find that a more organised (or possibly greedier) person had bought it all while my back was turned.

The wide support of the congregation, friends, family, and the occasional passer by delivered an excellent day. Joe Darling, in his town crier uniform out on the street, added a lively festivity to the occasion. In spite of challenging weather the event was a great financial success. We are ever nearer building our disabled access toilets. My sense of the event is that again demonstrates the commitment of the congregation to work collectively to achieve a common goal. Thanks and congratulations to everyone involved.

Jim Blair



*Top left: Joe Darling – Town Crier Top row: Patricia Walker-Hesson / Jane Blackall and Michaela von Briteze / Juliet Edwards
Bottom row: John Hands / Sarah Tinker, Jo Ridgers and Doris Campbell / Lucky Dolan*

Wanted: Minutes Secretary

Our management committee is in need of a minutes secretary! Meetings take place once every 4 to 6 weeks from 7-9pm on a weekday evening. Please contact Sarah if you think you might be willing and able to volunteer...



Our Wardens' Column

What's On in Our Busy Building...

Groundworks completed their three weeks work here on schedule last year, but unfortunately rain towards the end of that time affected the quality of the paint surface on the railings, so they will be returning in January to redo this. Rain has also been puddling in some places on the paving, and they will be relaying some sections to try and improve this.



I think we're just beginning to get used to the sudden spaciousness at the front of the church. From the office in particular the view has transformed from leafy enclosure to a view of the bench, the street, and of course the new beds packed with flowers for the coming Spring and Summer. Perhaps inspired by this, we've also been doing our bit by pruning the bushes by the nursery, and pulling down some of the ivy out back. We're pleased to see that the bulbs planted outside the nursery in 2006 are coming up again and we've also been experimenting with having more living plants in the church rather than cut flowers. We've also moved some cupboards out of the entrance foyer to give more sense of space. Sadly, as so many of them are disappearing, we've decided to keep the Singing the Living Tradition hymnbooks in a lockable cupboard from now on.

The self-practice Ashtanga group which meets here Monday to Thursday mornings is going from strength to strength with 11 people here for a talkthrough at the beginning of January. On Sunday 20th Jan, 2.30-4.30 their teacher, Lynne Pinette, is offering a free workshop for a gentler form of yoga which is suitable for all ages, Yin Yoga. If there is sufficient interest she may offer a weekly class in this in the New Year.

Interfaith Ministers are holding services at 7pm on Friday 25th January and on Friday 22nd February. Beit Klal Israel synagogue are celebrating Tu B'shvat on Monday 21st. Richard Sylvester is giving more talks on Non-Duality on Saturday 26th January and 16th February 2-5pm (£10).

February is quite a busy month for regular hirers as groups restart after the Christmas break. The Heruka Buddhists start another of their meditation courses on Wednesday 6th February (contact the Heruka centre on 8455 7563 for further details). The Temenos Society are holding a series of evening lectures on the 12th 19th and 26th Feb. The Alister Hardy Society is also meeting here on 12th Feb, and the Pastoral and Analytic Psychologists are holding their regular meetings on the first and third Thursday of the month.

On Saturdays there are several all-day workshops. Julia Pikal is leading another one on working with the Inner Child on February 9th. Julian Marshall, who gave several improvised piano concerts here last year is holding one on songwriting on the 23rd and the Movement for Spiritual Inner Awareness (MSIA) are here again on the 16th.

The Church Choir has also restarted on Monday evenings and Seicho-no-Ie have come back from their new year break to fill the church with song and laughter on Saturday nights with their Japanese/Brazilian blend of Buddhism and Christianity.

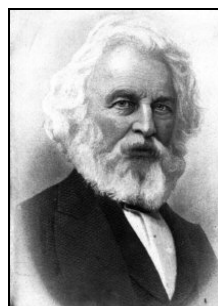
It's nice to see the building so busy, and the income from lettings (hopefully over £40,000 last year) is an essential contribution to church funds, enabling us to save for improvements like the new disabled access toilets.

David Berridge and Jenny Moy



"If we listened to our intellect, we'd never have a love affair. We'd never have a friendship. We'd never go into business, because we'd be too cynical. Well, that's nonsense. You've got to jump off cliffs all the time and build your wings on the way down."

Annie Dillard



*"Kind hearts are the gardens,
Kind thoughts are the roots,
Kind words are the flowers,
Kind deeds are the fruits,
Take care of your garden
And keep out the weeds,
Fill it with sunshine
Kind words and kind deeds."*

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Creativity Engagement Group... this month with Rev. Simon John Barlow

“Build A Bower – Just For The Love Of It!”

Thursday 14th February, 7.00-9.00pm, downstairs in the library



In ‘The Parlement of Foules’ Geoffrey Chaucer intimates that on St Valentine’s day birds gather in congregation before the goddess Nature to choose their mates. Some partial remembering of that prompted an image of a male bowerbird from a visit to the Australian rainforest nearly twenty years ago to come into my mind when I was first planning this workshop. An article in Wikipedia describes the antics of the male as follows:

“The most notable characteristic of bowerbirds is the extraordinarily complex behaviour of males, which is to build a bower to attract mates. Depending on the species, the bower ranges from a circle of cleared earth with a small pile of twigs in the center to a complex and highly decorated structure of sticks and leaves — usually shaped like a walkway, a small hut or a maypole (I would add ‘or a pair of angel wings’) — into and around which the male places a variety of objects he has collected. These objects — usually strikingly colored — may include hundreds of shells, leaves, flowers, feathers, stones, berries, and even discarded plastic items or pieces of glass.”

When I set out to create my own bower to attract some aspect of the Spirit of Love, I felt called to re-use parts of some failed textile projects – a felt bag and mixed media piece. Finally three bowers were created: a tiny one of a felt base decorated with seeds and thread from a project that never happened; a nest ‘rescued’ from the mixed media idea containing a felt geode; and a large felt bowl containing felt eggs of rainbow colours. I hope you will have as much fun making your own bower(s) as I have.

In the weeks prior to the workshop I hope you will look out for: ‘objets trouvés’ from coloured threads and shiny packaging to seeds and leaves; bits of yarn, material, beads and collage items which call to you from any stash of textiles and paper you may possess; failed art projects which can be dissected and recycled.

Papier-mâché bowls made from recycled paper, felt bowls and the bases of paper carrier bags will be provided as starting points for bowers (although you may prefer to make your own during or prior to the session), as will a limited selection of collage images and shiny threads, pva glue, raffia and wool tops for felting.

It would be helpful if you can bring a pair of scissors, strong needle, paints (if you intend to use them) and, if you wish to make felt, a large plastic bowl. You might prefer to construct your bower out of raffia, straw or twigs built up in 3D on sturdy paper or in a small box, make an origami-style bower, use some form of clay, or a textile piece to interweave with your found objects, in which case please bring whatever you feel you may need.



As usual, if these particular activities don’t take your fancy, you are most welcome to bring your own craftwork along, and simply sit with us in good company for the evening. There are usually biscuits and various other goodies to be eaten too...

If you would like to know more about the creativity engagement group please do talk to Jane Blackall or Patricia Walker. Photographs of work from several of the projects we’ve worked on over the last few years can be found on our website:

www.kensington-unitarians.org.uk/creativity.html



“Seedy Sunday” Seed Swap and Shared Meal



Sunday 2nd March, 12.30-2.00pm

As we move toward spring it's time for gardeners to think about planting flower and vegetable seeds for the year ahead. On “Seedy Sunday” we invite you to take part in a community seed swap at Essex Church.

Please let me know if you are planning to be there and if you have any seeds (even small plants) to swap. It might be that you have saved seeds from your own garden or window-box or perhaps you have bought a packet of seeds from a shop and have ended up with more than you need for your own personal use.

If you are new to gardening and don't have any seeds to swap then do come along anyway. We're likely to have some spares. As an added incentive we are going to have a shared meal on the same day so that there's a little extra encouragement to stay behind...

Potluck Lunch: Doris Campbell will be coordinating the lunch arrangements for our shared meal. There will be a sign-up sheet so you can let us know what food or drink you're planning to bring along.

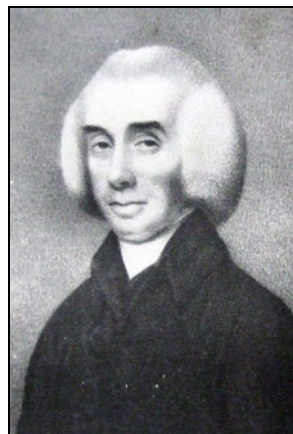
Jane Blackall



“A well-known scientist (some say it was Bertrand Russell) once gave a public lecture on astronomy. He described how the earth orbits around the sun and how the sun, in turn, orbits around the centre of a vast collection of stars called our galaxy. At the end of the lecture, a little old lady at the back of the room got up and said: “What you have told us is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise.” The scientist gave a superior smile before replying, “What is the tortoise standing on?” “You're very clever, young man, very clever,” said the old lady. “But it's turtles all the way down!””

**From 'A Brief History of Time' by Stephen Hawking
Submitted by Will Lyons**

Theophilus Lindsey: 1723-1808



Later this year - on 3rd November - we will mark the bicentenary of the death of Theophilus Lindsey, who died in 1808. Never heard of him? It could be said that the life and work of Lindsey is one of the reasons why the Unitarian movement exists in Britain today, and why we indeed are called 'Essex' Church.

Lindsey left the Church of England in 1773, finding that he could no longer subscribe to the creeds of the established church, and moved to London. The following year, in April 1774, he established in Essex Street, off The Strand, the first avowedly Unitarian congregation in Britain (at a time when the expression of such views was still illegal). It is from this congregation that we are in part descended, and the Trust of the original chapel survives in Essex Church today. By the 1880s the population in that part of central London was declining, and it was decided to move westwards to Kensington, joining a newer congregation that had recently been started there. Unitarian Headquarters today still occupies the site of the original Essex Street Chapel, though sadly not in the same building.

Lindsey is buried in the Bunhill Fields Cemetery, off City Road, London EC1. Perhaps as part of our celebration of his life we can arrange a visit to his grave (maybe on 1st or 2nd November?). I'm sure others from the London District would be interested in joining us. I believe the last major pilgrimage there was in 1974, marking the bicentenary of the founding of the Essex Street Chapel in 1774.

The following is Lindsey's view of our faith:

“The Unitarian doctrine therefore is no novelty; namely, that religious worship is to be addressed only to the One true God, the Father. For it was the doctrine our blessed Saviour taught and always practiced, and his apostles after him; and it was also the universal practice of the Christian Church, with little or no variation, for the first three centuries.”

These days it is easy to forget what a radical doctrine that was at the time.

Howard Hague

One Sunday in January...



In a month not renowned for its cheeriness, January 13th deserves praise for being a fun-filled Sunday here at Essex Church. Four different activities took place that day and several of us took part in them all. Have you noticed that numbers attending worship have been quietly growing recently? We are having to put out more chairs and we'll be discussing the need for more hymn books at our next committee meeting, but it was still a surprise to have 50 adults and three children turn up that day, most of them on time!

Every few months we hold a sharing circle after worship, described by one participant as 'a sort of adult show-and-tell'. On this Sunday there were 14 of us sitting in the library together listening to someone's favourite music, hearing about a book just read, looking at a treasured photo and hearing about an artist's project to create a piece of work each day with the actual paintings there for us to admire. Gwen Molloy impressed us all with a recital from memory of a French essay about a goat, complete with translation for the linguistically challenged.

Our third activity of the day was the Nia dance class led by Sonya Leite. This was an introductory session to find out if enough people would be interested in a regular class here at Essex Church. The fact that latecomers had trouble squeezing in at the back of the hall says it all. It was hard to count the bodies as we kept moving around but there were at least 28 of us enjoying moving to great music. Nia combines structured movement with free dance and encourages people to take it at their own pace so it really does work for a wide range of fitness levels. We are now looking to see when a Nia class can be fitted into the busy schedule of lettings here (*see box elsewhere in the newsletter – Nia classes will be on the 2nd Sunday of each month – generally the same day as "Songs and Silence for the Soul"*).

Finally, on that busy Sunday, it was time for our monthly Songs and Silence for the Soul, in which we sing chants from around the world and sit together in candlelit silence. This group has been meeting for two years now and has built up a core of regulars who are good at welcoming newcomers. This proved useful because of the twelve people there that day half had never been before. They had seen the group advertised on the Internet or heard about it from friends, which seem to be the two main ways that people find out about most of our activities. So if you like what's happening here do tell your friends – there might be something going on here that appeals to them too.

Sarah Tinker



Our Sharing Circle

Derek Jackson brought this song (*translated by Walter Lowenfels, from the French of Gullelic, with music by Pete Seeger*) to the sharing circle in January:

Tomorrow's Children

*But you who know days of a diff'rent kind,
Tomorrow's children for whom work is more like play,
And living is what poems are for me today,
A passionate utterance carefully designed.
Remember us, the lame, the deaf, the blind,
Not for the stupid things we've done and can't forget;
Nor the endless dull jobs over which we all sweat,
Nor all the sad chronicles that we leave behind.*

*But that we loved as much as anyone ever did,
That we knew joys, the little deeds, the grand design.
The dream of changing the world to something new.
Believe us, in our way we loved to live.
Know that many, many things we loved, and of all of these,
Our greatest joy was in opening the way for you.*

John Hands brought this extract from Karen Armstrong's book 'A Short History of Myth' to the sharing circle:

We Need Myths...

"We need myths that will help us to identify with all our fellow beings, not simply with those who belong to our ethnic, national or ideological tribe. We need myths that help us to realise the importance of compassion, which is not always regarded as sufficiently productive in our pragmatic, rational world. We need myths that help us to create a spiritual attitude, to see beyond our immediate requirements, and enable us to experience a transcendent value that challenges our solipsistic selfishness. We need myths that help us to venerate earth as sacred once again instead of merely using it as a 'resource'. This is crucial, because unless there is some kind of spiritual revolution that is able to keep abreast of our technological genius, we will not save our planet."

London District News



Every Unitarian congregation is a member of our national General Assembly. We are also part of our local district organisation, which is known as the LDPA – the London District and South Eastern Provincial Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. We now have a new District Minister, Rev David Usher, who is keen to support, encourage and enable congregations and individuals in all that we do as Unitarians.

David has started a new newsletter called IMPULSE which is well worth reading. In it, David outlines some five year goals for our District, which will appeal to us here at Essex Church; for example, improved communications, leadership training, a visible media profile, and increased membership. David will be visiting us later in the year to lead worship and chat over lunch about ways we can support our District and in the meantime do keep an eye on the various activities that are already on offer and see if you can attend.

Rev. Sarah Tinker

District Conference on Growth

Saturday 16th February at Croydon Unitarian Church

The London District is developing programmes for the next 5 years which are designed to enliven congregations and to enhance our profile. One goal is to increase our membership by 50% by 2013. As a first step towards identifying what might be done towards that goal, the District is sponsoring this day conference, which will address some issues around growing a congregation, including obstacles which need to be overcome.

Course in Congregational Leadership

A 4-session course designed for London and South East Unitarians interested in taking a more active leadership role in congregational life.

The 4 sessions will cover:

17th May - Worship

7th June - Congregational Life

28th June - Rites of Passage

19th July - Leading groups

Each session will be held from 11am to 4pm and attendance at all four is encouraged though not essential. There is no charge and our congregation can help with travel expenses for anyone who wants to attend.

For more information on either of these events see the flyers on our foyer noticeboard. To register contact the district minister, Rev. David Usher, on 01732 465248 or via email: dusher@sevenoaks-unitarians.org.uk.

Thursday Nights at Essex Church...

We aim to have a congregational activity every Thursday night here at Essex Church – a fortnightly adult educational activity, monthly book group and monthly creativity group. Occasionally the fortnightly group is a closed one which runs for a few months and that is the case with the “Quest” group that starts in February and runs through to May. Closed groups work well in allowing a deeper trust to build between participants but they require people to commit themselves and inevitably they exclude people. The “Quest” group is now fully booked so apologies to anyone who might have liked to join it.

Bhakti Marga - Om Chanting

But do not despair, as there is something else happening here each Thursday night to which everyone is invited. On Thursday evenings, for one hour, the Bhakti Marga group chant the Hindu sound of the eternal universe – Om – in a deep and healing meditation. It is a quite profound experience and the hour passes remarkably quickly. The group is committed to healing on both an individual and planetary level.

If you would like to experience this, do come along one Thursday evening. The Om chanting takes place between 6.30 and 7.30pm but you are asked to arrive in good time as no-one can enter the hall or leave during these times. After the chanting some people stay for a further silent meditation but this is optional. There is no charge for this group although donations may be given for the work of the Bhakti Marga community. The following quotations give a sense of Swami Vishwananda's message. He was born in Mauritius in 1978 and he combines Hindu teachings with Christianity's unconditional love.

"The journey one has to make is from the mind to the heart."

"Through the ages many teachers, many Saints and Sages have lived. Their message was in its essence always the same, yet wrapped in different words, languages & traditions. What we lack in this world are not the teachings on God-realisation; what we lack is people's will to really go within and put the teachings into practice. There exist a lot of distractions that lead to 'outer attachments' that are finite and cause suffering again and again when lost. People should become aware of the 'inner attachments' that are eternal and cause no suffering. God is always there – like the sun shining through a window. It is up to us to draw the curtains and open the window."

For more information: www.bhaktimarga.org

Christmas at Othona 2007

I packed my hope for a different Christmas along with my Secret Santa gift and set off from Waterloo to Dorchester South by train, took the 31 bus to Bridport for an overnight stay with a friend and then the X53 to Othona in Burton Bradstock... stepping into the unknown.



Unknown indeed! So unknown that the driver of the X53 hadn't heard of Othona and gave me a strange look when I said it's a Christian Community! I got off the bus at the pub and asked for directions thinking "Burton Bradstock is a village, not that big so it must be nearby... surely?" Um... surely NOT! It's nearer to Cogden Beach, nearly 2 miles away!! "Oh no! The bus has gone and the next one is 3 hours away. Supper, the time to meet all the other Christmas Revellers AND eat, is at 6pm. It's now 4pm. If I wait here until the next bus I will be too late for supper and cold and fed up and..." and so my inner panic-monger went on. Wisdom took over and I set off on the long walk with a slightly heavy heart. The light was beginning to fail, dusk was on its way and I had little idea of where I was or where I was going.

My spirits began to lift when I saw the sea, the view was stunning; I settled into 'Being in the Now' (thanks Eckart Tolle and the Buddhists!), counting my blessings, and accepting what would unfold. "All will be well" I said, with my gloved fingers firmly crossed in my pocket! I was chilly when I set off but when I entered the candlelit house at 4.45pm I was boiling hot, glove and hat-less and desperate for the loo! The front porch was in darkness and I could see neither a knocker nor a bell so I pushed open the door feeling a bit like a burglar and followed the sounds of voices which led me, by candlelight, to the kitchen/dining room. The loo, a cup of tea, and a comfy armchair in the sitting-room lit with candles and warmed with an open log fire, restored my equilibrium as I sat, observing the people already there and the ones arriving. A few people had arrived before me and no-one was talking much... yet!

The candlelight wasn't, it turned out, a nice little touch for Christmas but actually a power cut!!! so we met and ate as a group - 32 of us -in semi-darkness; a fitting and humbling scene actually given the occasion and the venue. We heard that the house had been built in the 1920's deliberately without electricity or mod-cons by a group of religious women who wanted to live basically. After a few hiccups the power was restored and the house returned to its normal cosy self.

The next 4 days whizzed by in a wondrous round of eating, talking, listening, walking, working and worshipping through singing and praying; reading and meditating; building and burning a bonfire; making decorations and mince pies; setting and clearing tables; washing up; chopping vegetables; drinking mulled wine and juice, enjoying a lengthy Secret Santa episode etc... getting to know and enjoy each other. The highlight of Christmas morning was a surprise stocking at everyone's door filled with chocolate, a message, a satsuma and nuts, delivered... I suppose... by the man himself!! (the staff might know more...?)

All of this was interspersed with food for my soul with our times in the beautiful chapel singing carols and hearing a new take on the Christmas story. We had prayers and readings from various people (including me!) and on the last night a short service. It was an added delight to have five children there. A few of us listened to the BBC Carol Service from Kings College.

It was truly a Community - and quite possibly my best ever - Christmas. It surpassed my hopes and (without wanting to be too gushy) filled my heart with 'the peace that passes all understanding', giving me the opportunity to know that this is what has been missing for all of these years. I consider myself to be a Unitarian so would have been very unhappy to have had 'dogma'



on the agenda. The Christianity I found at Othona was more than palatable to me. It was clear but understated and... given the occasion...wholly appropriate, considered and celebrated; the approach is of welcoming all regardless of belief and of none.

This for me is how Christmas should be. Hooray! I've found what I want! Santa, with his sleigh full-to-bursting with 'stuff', never did have a chance with me. I have now discovered his twin (they were separated at birth) alive and well living at Othona complete with his sack full of peace and simplicity. Riches indeed.

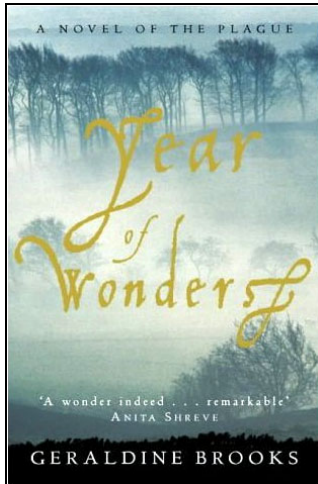
Jo Ridgers

Reading Engagement Group

“Year of Wonders”

by Geraldine Brooks

Thursday 28th February, 7.00-9.00pm



The reading engagement group’s next topic of discussion will be “Year of Wonders” by Geraldine Brooks. This book was chosen by Betty Evans and will be the focus of our next reading group meeting on **Thursday 28th February**.

Information from Amazon UK:

“Year of Wonders describes the 17th-century plague that is carried from London to a small Derbyshire village by an itinerant tailor. As villagers begin, one by one, to die, the rest face a choice. Do they flee their village in the hope of outrunning the plague or do they stay? The lord of the manor and his family pack and leave. The rector, Michael Mompellion, argues forcefully that the villagers should stay put, isolate themselves from neighbouring towns and villages and prevent the contagion from spreading. His oratory wins the day and the village turns in on itself. Cocooned from the outside world and ravaged by the disease, its inhabitants struggle to retain their humanity in the face of the disaster. The narrator, a young widow called Anna Frith, is one of the few who succeeds. Together with Mompellion and his wife Elinor, she tends the dying and battles to prevent her fellow villagers from descending into drink, violence and superstition. All is complicated by the intense, unacknowledgable feelings she develops for both the rector and his wife. Year of Wonders sometimes seems anachronistic as historical fiction. Anna and Mompellion can occasionally appear to be modern sensibilities unaccountably transferred to 17th-century Derbyshire. However there is no mistaking the power of Brooks's imagination or the skill with which she constructs her story of ordinary people struggling to cope with extraordinary circumstances.”

All are welcome to join the book group. Please do try to read the books before the meeting if you’re planning to come along. It would also aid discussion if you pick out favourite passages to share. Members of the group take turns in choosing books so we read a wide variety of material.

LGBT History Month

The LGBT History Month site says:

“Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans History Month celebrates the lives and achievements of the LGBT community. We are committed to celebrate its diversity and that of the society as a whole. We encourage everyone to see diversity and cultural pluralism as the positive forces that they are and endeavour to reflect this in all we do.”



LGBT History Month is an opportunity for all of us to learn more about the histories of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Britain and Northern Ireland.

Until recently, most LGBT people preferred to avoid attention. Many still do. Even today, the penalties for those who refuse to conceal themselves, or fail to do so, can be severe. They can range from ostracism and victimisation to assault and even murder.

In the past, the silencing of LGBT people was often reinforced by legislation. The most recent example was Section 28, passed in 1988 and repealed in 2003, which was intended to restrict debate on homosexuality, particularly in schools.

One event you might be interested in is the following:

“Was Shakespeare Gay Then?”

(and other irrelevant questions)

Tuesday, 5th February at 6.30pm

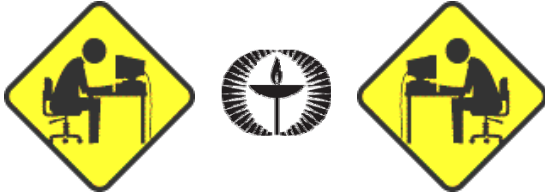
Acton Library, High Street, Acton, W3 6NA

Talk by Paul Patrick, one of the founders of LGBT History Month: An irreverent romp through the “were they? / weren't they?” of history, with a nod to the real and important reasons why reclaiming Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans history is essential to both our LGBT communities and society as a whole.

More information: www.lgbthistorymonth.org.uk

See the website for details of other events.

“Transatlantic Dialogue”



Will Lyons has been keeping in touch with a recent UU visitor to our church: Francis Coleman from Rochester, NY. Following on from an article in November, here are more snippets from their correspondence:

Will, 11th November:

I was stopped in the street the other day by two young women who were Jehovah's Witnesses. I always tell them straightaway that I'm not a believer but I was astonished when one of them said "Oh, a humanist - I've heard of them but I've never met one before. You know, the other day I met someone who thought the earth was flat!" I don't know whether to laugh or cry at being bracketed with "flat-earthers"!

Talking to members of the congregation as to what would happen if someone came along to a service and proclaimed themselves to believe that the Bible was literal, the general opinion was that as long as they didn't exhibit racist, misogynistic or homophobic tendencies they'd be made welcome and we'd give them a cup of tea! If they found our ethos distasteful and chose not to stay they would be self-excluding.

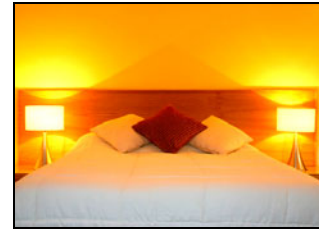
I am not a 'Dawkins' when it comes to religion (otherwise I wouldn't attend a Unitarian church) rather I tend to agree with the late Stephen Jay Gould who posits the principle of NOMA (non overlapping magisterium) and I quote what he described as "a blessedly simple and entirely conventional resolution to the supposed conflict between science and religion." He defines the term magisterium as "a domain where one form of teaching holds the appropriate tools for meaningful discourse and resolution" and the NOMA principle "the magisterium of science covers the empirical realm: what the Universe is made of (fact) and why does it work in this way (theory). The magisterium of religion extends over questions of ultimate meaning and moral value. These two do not overlap, nor do they encompass all inquiry."

Francis, 22nd November:

I am an agnostic. I could never be an atheist, because of all the evidence of the existence of something in the cosmos. I cannot prove what this evidence means, but absence of proof is not proof of absence. Those who conclude that there is no 'God' - defining 'God' any way one likes - are effectively saying that absence of proof IS proof of absence. That violates a fundamental precept of rationality. So I conclude that atheism is therefore a faith-based belief of the most extreme sort.

We both agree that 'religion' is not necessary for morality. But answers to the existential questions - the 'Why' or 'Purpose' questions - answers that drive our values, ethics, and morality - can never be known for certain - e.g. through science. And so we must base our answers to these existential questions on unprovable 'beliefs'. One source of beliefs is religion. But there are other sources too. As you so rightly suggest, there were values, ethics and moralities long before Christianity.

Accommodation Request



Two steady, nice Germans, a couple, friends of my brother, are looking for an apartment or a room where they can make breakfast etc. for 3rd – 10th April, ideally quite central.

If anybody has such a thing, or knows about it: Please contact Michaela von Britzke by email on michaelavonb@yahoo.co.uk.

...a local event you might be interested in...

A God of One's Own: The Individualisation and Cosmopolitanisation of Religion

**13th February 2008 at 6:30 pm
Old Theatre, LSE, Houghton St, WC2A 2AE**

This lecture is on "religious modernity, seen from the angle of societies that have adopted the autonomy of individuals, thereby creating a god of their own" and will be given by Ulrich Beck who is centennial professor in the Department of Sociology at the London School of Economics.

St. Valentine,

From long ago and far away

Whispered in my ear this week:

"Away with logic," he intoned,

"Have done with reason for a time.

Cut beneath the crust of human appearance,

Penetrate the core.

Bore into the land of love

Whence comes all truth and beauty and goodness.

Time there is enough to think and theorize;

So take time to send a greeting to those you love

Who have given you more than you can ever give.

Live in love, this irrational commitment

Laugh and laugh,

Shed a tear,

Remember me."



Richard S. Gilbert

A Message from Our Student Minister...



Sermon Online: In response to suggestions by members of the congregation, my remarks from the New Year service on December 30th are now online. Thank you to everyone who offered me feedback after the service – I appreciated all your insights.

Christmas Cards: Also – a huge 'thank you' to everyone who sent me a Christmas card – it has been wonderful to have them around my home over the festive period as little reminders of our beloved community.

Unitarian Radio: I often listen to the online radio station called 'UUpLink' as I love the combination of music, Unitarian spiritual inspiration and cultural commentary. UUpLink describes itself as:

"...offering an eclectic mix of music, poetry, sermons, interviews and other specials. We're here for the spiritually progressive, the inspirationally adventurous. Features include Free-thought Radio, the Humanist Network News and the Liberal Religious Hour. We're helping to define the direction of tomorrow's progressive faith."

I have heard some excellent remarks, interviews, services, contemporary Unitarian composers and more general music outside of the Unitarian world. Why should Classic FM have all the good tunes! Listen at:

www.rbabb.com/webcast.html

Daniel Hughes

Essex Church Book Amnesty



One of the perks of membership here at Essex Church is that you can borrow books from our library down in the basement. A small stock of new books is kept up in the new church. The library is well stocked and cared for by Howard Hague, and covers a good range of spiritual topics. For example, when I was planning a recent service on Unitarians and science there were six highly regarded titles on this subject waiting for me to find on the library shelf.

All you need to do to access this library is to become a member here at Essex Church and then sign a book out when you borrow it. That's where the amnesty comes in. A number of books have disappeared recently and if you happen to have them on your bookshelf we'd like them back.

A similar amnesty applies to our hymn books. Fourteen copies of 'Singing the Living Tradition' and twelve green hymn books are missing. People may have taken them home when preparing a service but we would be glad too have them back now. Elsewhere in this newsletter we mention that we need to buy more hymn books as the number of people attending worship on a Sunday morning increases – if you would like to buy your own copy let us know and we'll order one for you.

But in the meantime – do bring back those hymn and library books – and no questions will be asked.

Rev. Sarah Tinker

Dances of Universal Peace

Sunday 3rd February, 2-5.00pm at Richmond Unitarian Church
Ormond Road, Richmond, Surrey, TW10 6TH

Dances of Universal Peace are inspired by the wisdom and sacred phrases of the world's authentic spiritual traditions, which are sung while dancing. The words along with the movement engender a mood of joy, peace, liberation, contemplation and presence.

"The Dances of Universal Peace change lives. And the world changes life by life. All over the earth people long for an alternative to the numbing effects of consumerism... They long for an actual experience of reverence for the earth and life in all its forms. The dances show how."

Neil Douglas-Klotz



There is no need for any previous experience of this, or any other form of dance. Please bring snacks to share during the break. The sessions will run on the first Sunday of every month from 2.00pm - 5.00pm. Admission will be £5.00 (concessions) to £8.00. For more information, please contact Lindsay (telephone 020 8891 5825 or email lindsaystevens@blueyonder.co.uk)

Sunday Services at Essex Church

3rd February – “No Pain? No Gain?”

Service led by Rev. Sarah Tinker

Do we humans have to suffer in order to make progress? Why is life sometimes so very tough and demanding? In this service we will explore what a liberal religious approach to life's challenges might have to offer us.

10th February – “21st Century Medical Ethics”

Service led by Rev. Sarah Tinker

As the pace of scientific progress continues apace our society struggles to decide what is acceptable and what is not. How shall we make these decisions? What criteria need to be considered? In this service we shall consider some recent cases and make up our own minds about the issues involved.

17th February – “Visiting St. Valentine”

Service led by Rev. Simon John Barlow

A couple of years ago I paid my respects to the ‘incorruptible’ body of St Valentine in his Basilica in the Umbrian city of Terni – charmingly dismissed as the “Manchester of Italy” by many guide books. This service is in response to that visit and throws a pebble into the eternal human pondering on the question ‘What is Love?’

24th February – “The ‘Law’ of Attraction?”

Service led by Rev. Sarah Tinker

There has been much publicity in recent times about this idea that we create our own reality. Books such as ‘The Secret’ and ‘The Cosmic Ordering Service’ have been sold in their millions. Do they have a message for us all or should we be avoiding such simplistic approaches to life? Do they rest upon some deeper spiritual truths that might be of greater value?

March Newsletter Deadline

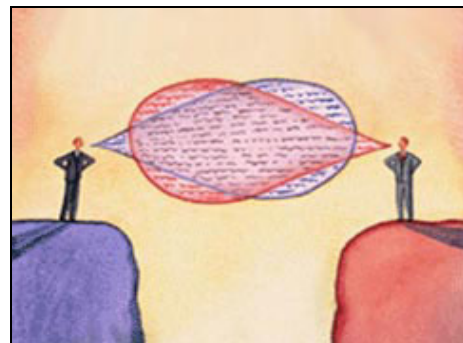


The deadline for submitting items for the next double-issue is **Sunday 10th February**. Please send items (such as poems, artwork, quotes, articles, notices, etc...) to Jane Blackall or any committee member before this date.

Thank you!!!

Science and Religion

A Continuing Engagement Group at Essex Church



When we planned a monthly science and religion engagement group back in the autumn we hoped it would attract some new people to attend, give different people a chance to lead the group and provide a place for us to explore some of the key topics being debated at present. The four sessions so far have certainly lived up to this hope, with thoughtful presentations and a high quality of speaking and listening.

‘Mind-stretching’ and ‘food for thought’ were comments heard after Howard Hague’s fascinating group on ‘The Dawkins Factor’ in January. Several of us wondered if Richard Dawkins might be converted to our unique Unitarian style of religion where a belief in the supernatural is merely one option amongst many and where a sense of awe and wonder at our natural world is more popular than a belief in a divine being.

This quotation from Dawkins’ essay in a recent collection edited by Ben Rogers entitled ‘Is Nothing Sacred?’ sounds quite like some members of Essex Church.

“I don’t think they come much more anti-religious than I do... and yet there are objects and occasions which evoke in me a profound sense of the sacred.”

Two more sessions of the group are planned. Please do come along to join us in exploring these fascinating issues in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere. All are welcome.

Tuesday 5th February, 7.00-9.00pm:

“Cosmology”

Led by Will Lyons

Tuesday 4th March, 7.00-9.00pm:

“The Psychology of Prejudice”

Led by Caroline Blair

Albert Einstein: *“Science without religion is lame.*

Religion without science is blind.”

What do you think?