



# A GLIMPSE OF BRITISH UNITARIAN CONGREGATIONS: DEALING WITH DECLINE AND SEEKING FOR GROWTH

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## **Abstract**

The authors of this article analyse why the number of adherents of some congregations in the Unitarian movement, whose membership is generally declining, is growing. The research is based on an analysis of written sources as well as fieldwork (including interviews, questionnaires, focus groups and participation in Sunday services) carried out in 2015 in three British Unitarian congregations. The project has been financed by the Hibbert Trust. Common denominators of numerical growth in these congregations which otherwise are very different from each other are: community-building, a range of weekly activities, good public image and people enthusiastic about their work in the congregation (minister's personality plays an important role but this is not a crucial factor). There are additional factors like chapels being the only liberal congregation in an area and therefore having no competitors in the „market of religions“. These are congregations that have moved beyond the Enlightenment heritage of the Unitarian movement. Research also showed that among the people Unitarians have attracted are those who are dissatisfied with religious groups to which they previously belonged. In general, these examples do not reverse the common trend that a liberal segment of religious groups (including Unitarians) is good in deconstructing dominant beliefs and practices of their traditions and applying a hermeneutics of suspicion but is struggling with offering new constructive alternatives.

## Keywords

Unitarianism · secularisation · church growth · Great Britain

The purpose of this article is to analyse why some congregations belonging to the British Unitarian movement are growing numerically, even if the general tendency is decline. It may sound like an exotic topic for the Baltic region where Unitarians are a very small minority.<sup>1</sup> However, Christians who do not follow a traditional Trinitarian doctrine have also existed outside Unitarianism. During the First World War ideas of Oneness Pentecostalism, a nontrinitarian movement in Pentecostalism, were preached in Petrograd by Andrew David Urshan, a Persian-born Assyrian evangelist who travelled widely around the world (Hall 2009; for general information concerning Pentecostalism in Estonia see Ringvee 2015: 57–66). In 1924 Urshan reported that there were about 50 followers in Estonia, „an offspring of the Petrograd revival“ (Reed 2014: 59). After the Second World War, some Slavic Oneness Pentecostals moved to Latvia. In 1948 Nikolai Smorodin, a leading Russian Oneness Pentecostal, visited Latvia and met with Latvian Pentecostal leaders (for example, Jānis Bormanis),<sup>2</sup> preaching in Ventspils Tabors Baptist Church (a congregation very much influenced by Pentecostalism). As a result, a group of about 20 believers was formed in Ventspils, which used unleavened bread in Holy Communion and baptised only in the name of Jesus. The Baptist leadership advised the local Baptist pastor to recognise their baptisms. People living outside Latvia also went to Timofei Semenov, the leader of the group, to be baptised. Later in the 1960s, state authorities allowed them to use the Baptist church in Staldzene, not far from Ventspils. This use was acceptable to the Baptists because the Latvian congregation was small and had been closed (Tēraudkalns 2003: 187–189). Of course, we should bear in mind that Oneness Pentecostalism as a conservative

<sup>1</sup> In 1993 a Unitarian-Universalist congregation was established in Riga by the classical Indian dancer and choreographer, American Latvian Vija Vētra (Raita 2019). However, the congregation remained small and currently does not exist as a legal entity.

<sup>2</sup> After the Second World War Pentecostals in Latvia, like in other Soviet republics, were forced to join Baptists. J. Bormanis used to be a Baptist pastor before the Second World War but in 1930, after the split in the Āgenskalns Baptist Church (Riga), he formed a Pentecostal congregation.

movement is very different from Unitarianism that has roots in the Radical Reformation and Enlightenment rationalism.

The research presented in this article is based on an analysis of written sources as well as fieldwork (including interviews, questionnaires, focus groups and participation in Sunday services) carried out in 2015 in three Unitarian congregations selected from the list provided by Derek McAuley, who was then Chief Officer of the General Assembly of the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches: New Unity (London), Kingswood congregation (near Birmingham) and Octagon Chapel (Norwich). The choice of these congregations was based on the idea that the selected congregations should differ from each other in the theology they present and in the context in which they are situated. Kingswood's perspective is that of liberal Christianity, and it is a typical village church. The other two are urban congregations. New Unity has a post-Christian humanist perspective. The congregation in Norwich does not position itself in one particular segment of spirituality and does not emphasise a particular religious or philosophical tradition but draws from various traditions in its worship services. This kind of diversity provided the researchers with a wide scope of perspectives and possible reasons for growth.

The growth of liberal congregations is contrary to theories presented by a number of scholars. Dean Kelley, in his book published in 1972, expressed an opinion that for a church to grow numerically, there has to be clarity about its purpose. It should offer something important and valuable that demands commitment in return. Kelley, who was commissioned by the National Council of Churches (USA) to find out why the evangelical churches are growing, argued that these groups make serious demands and this is the reason they are growing (Kelley 1972). In a similar fashion Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, borrowing terms from economics, argued that „liberal religious doctrines fail to mobilize support, not because of what they offer, but because of what they lack“ (Stark, Finke 2000: 274). For both sociologists, Unitarian Universalists (UU)<sup>3</sup> attract a tiny following because „unbelievers have no earthly (and surely no heavenly) reason to join a church“ (Stark, Finke 2000: 271).

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<sup>3</sup> In 1961 in the United States Unitarians merged with Universalists, forming the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Scholars studying contemporary religious movements do not often write on Unitarians for the reasons described above – an assumption that the conservative side of religion is where the ‘real action’ takes place. So, in the beginning, some background information should be given about the Unitarian movement itself. It traces its roots back to the Radical Reformation. The earliest surviving Unitarian community in the world is found in Transylvania, a large region now part of Romania. Currently, the largest number of Unitarian communities is in the USA. Formally, the history of British Unitarianism as an organised movement started with Theophilus Lindsey who left the Church of England in 1773 and started a Unitarian congregation.

### BRITISH UNITARIANS IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY AND THE BEGINNING OF THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: NUMBERS AND VISIONS

It is difficult to provide a precise number of British Unitarians; reports on numbers tend to vary. The same can be said concerning how congregations define membership. Unitarian minister Stephen Lingwood writes: „The quota membership numbers are a kind of tax for what gets sent to the General Assembly. So there is a financial incentive to report lower numbers. I have heard of congregations keeping two membership lists, one they report as the basis of their quota payments, and another one that is larger“ (Lingwood 2015).

The Census of 31 March 1851 shows 229 Unitarian congregations in Britain, with 48,600 persons attending. In the 1870s there were probably about 52,000–55,000 Unitarians. By 1913 a decline in numbers had already been identified. After the First World War, a figure of 20,000–30,000 was accepted for decades, though nobody attempted to get precise data. An unofficial survey in 1927 suggests a figure of about 34,000 but that is an extrapolation from the 144 larger churches who responded and the actual figures are likely to have been lower. The 2001 National Census figure was 4187, though a more realistic figure of the number of people associated with Unitarian congregations is about 6000 to 6500 (Ruston 2012: 79–80). The overall decline should be viewed

in the larger context of a diminishing number of church-goers in the United Kingdom (UK), a process that started decades ago. In Sheffield, a traditional stronghold of nonconformity, in the 1960s Congregational and Presbyterian membership in England fell by 20% and Baptists by 13%. The same can be said about Anglicans – baptisms, over 500,000 per year at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, dropped below 400,000 in 1932 and did not recover. Confirmations, over 200,000 annually until 1928, had fallen by 1970 by 44% to 113,000 (Head 1991: 11). The number of members of Anglican churches in the UK fell from 1.44 million in 2008 to 1.36 million in 2013; the number of members of the Roman Catholic Church from 1.61 million to 1.40 million. Only 48 percent of those who ticked ‘Christian’ in the 2011 Census said they believed that Jesus was ‘a real person who died and came back to life and was the son of God’ (Report 2015a: 18).

British Unitarians have a vision for congregational growth, however the decade drop is still about 20% (in 2005 there were 3952 members of Unitarian congregations, in 2014 there were 3179). At the same time a congregational survey done in addition to the official numbers shows that in one month 80 congregations reported 831 visitors. The question for Unitarians is how to involve on a more regular basis at least some of these visitors (Lingwood 2014).

This problem of numerical decline is not new to British Unitarians. In 1964 the Foy Society, the young adult group associated with the Unitarian movement, set out to make the first detailed survey of British Unitarian congregations. Out of every 100 Unitarian members, only 14 were less than 35 years old – 45 were between 35 and 60, and 41 were older than 60. More than half of the congregations had fewer than 50 members (Unitarian Congregations Surveyed 1967: 19). In total there were 15,800 members, 12,500 supporters (defined as active participants who attend church services at least once a month) (Unitarian Congregations Surveyed 1967: 21). 63 congregations (30% of the total) had steadily declined over the last ten years. Congregations in large towns had better growth records than others. Congregations situated in working-class areas had a worse than average record of decline (A Census, 1967: 143). Among recommendations of researchers was an increase of congregational activities (newcomers will not be attracted to a congregation which does

nothing except meet on Sundays) and religious education (according to the authors of the report, the growth of Unitarianism in North America can in large part be attributed to the emphasis placed on religious education) (A Census, 1967: 62). In the 1980s there was an initiative for congregational growth, The Development Commission, but it had limited success.

In comparison, statistics of Universal Unitarianism (UU) in the United States of America (USA) after years of stagnation (with the lowest point in 1985 when the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) had 135,487 members), show signs of growth (164,196 members in 2010 and then again decline – 158,186 members in 2014) (UUA Membership Statistics).

It should be noted that there are changes in the way British and American Unitarians view themselves and reshape their identity responding to current cultural trends. During the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Unitarians in the UK and UU in the USA became more influenced by religious traditions other than Christianity. By the early 1960s Unitarian worship in the UK was still expressed in broadly liberal Christian terms, which had not changed greatly from the 1930s. From the mid-1970s changes in viewpoint within British Unitarianism took place – new prayers and worship elements, reading from a wider variety of contemporary sources and the wider use of silence within worship (Ruston 2012: 79). In *Services and Hymns of Experience and Hope* (1888) services are within the Christian tradition with readings from the Bible (Services and Hymns 1888). For comparison, in the marriage service offered in *Celebrating Life* (1993) the couple drink from a wine cup; this is inspired by the Jewish tradition and the words used are drawn from the service book of the liberal Jewish tradition. The service for the scattering of ashes includes an invocation of the elements upon ashes of the departed using words drawn from a Brahmin burial service. The celebration of a birth can be done in two ways – by Christian baptism or by rites influenced by non-Christian sources. It is the idea of invocation of the spirits of the natural world upon the child, something from the Native American Omaha tradition (Marshall 2007: 92–93, 78–79).

Vernon Marshall, a British Unitarian minister, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century prepared the questionnaire for Unitarian ministers and

accredited lay leaders. He received 80 out of 120 questionnaires. 44 of them said they practise meditation; 67 said that their personal faith has been influenced by other religions; 58 said that they refer to the calendars of other religions in Sunday services; 71 said that they bring teachings of other world religions into their preaching; 71 said they use the sacred writings of other religions or the works of modern religious teachers in their service. Yet, 42 agreed that British Unitarianism still is primarily a liberal Christian denomination and 28 placed themselves in the tradition of liberal Christianity; the next group, with ten respondents, identified themselves as non-Christian theists (Marshall 2007: 103–107).

Controversies in mainstream theology in the 1960s and 1970s were met with sympathetic interest by Unitarians. However, the British Unitarian movement failed to take advantage of these new trends in theology. Dissatisfaction with the then current situation pressed some Unitarians in 1962 to organise a group that subsequently became known as the Unitarian Renewal Group. This group aimed to attract a wide range of liberals and to move the Unitarian movement away from attachment to Judaeo-Christian theology and forms of worship. The Fellowship of Liberal Christians was formed to do the opposite – to emphasise the Christian dimension of religious liberalism (Head 1991: 19–20).

For scholars, these changes are an indication that Unitarians are moving to another category in the typology of religious groups. Religious studies scholar George D. Chryssides uses J. M. Yinger's typology and explores how Unitarians at the beginning were a sect (defined as a group that has separated from the mainstream religious tradition), then shifted to being a 'cult' because the movement became even less related to the dominant religious tradition of Western culture. The General Assembly of British Unitarians gave advice to their members that in the 2001 national census, which for the first time contained a question about religious allegiance, Unitarians should not simply tick the box labelled 'Christian', but should indicate that they are Unitarians (Chryssides 2002: 29–35). Unitarians (at least in the USA and the UK) show characteristics of being a denomination because they accept the legitimacy of other religious groups, have positive relationships with wider society and have organisational structures common to that of a denomination (Lee 1995: 380).

Unitarians do not have a single simple answer to the question of whether going beyond Christian traditions has contributed to the numerical growth of their movement and whether it is what Unitarians should do at all. There are many in the Unitarian movement who feel comfortable with a variety of spiritualities being practised and kept together in a creative way. Mike Rutter from Chorlton Unitarian Chapel writes: „I have now found a congenial spiritual home. (...) I have always been interested in ‘alternative’ ideas, e.g. meditation, esoteric systems of thought etc., as well as in conventional science.“ (Rutter 2014: 10). Present challenges and tensions in Unitarian identity-building are not viewed by all as something negative. Minister Andy Pakula expressed a conviction (in connection to a prediction that most current Unitarian congregations will not survive) that „the Unitarian congregations that remain will find their strength and begin the process of creating a new Unitarianism – very different from the Unitarianism of today“ (Andy Pakula Leaves 2012: 5). Others like Jim Corrigan, minister at Ipswich and Framlingham, thinks that Unitarians „may have been ‘facing the wrong way’ in targeting so much of our publicity effort at the ‘spiritual but not religious“ (Corrigan 2013: 10).

## STRATEGIES FOR NUMERICAL GROWTH AMONG UNITARIANS

Both British and American Unitarians for years have been thinking about ways to deal with decline. The American Unitarian Association authorised the Commission of Appraisal in 1934 to research the current state of Unitarianism and possible changes. Its conclusion was the following: „The general impression which the Commission has received from its studies is that Unitarians are a fairly intelligent group of men and women, better educated than the average, but not very much interested in the intellectual aspects of religion“ (Unitarians face a New Age 1936: 35).

Data gathered during the survey of 336 Unitarians showed a worrying lack of vitality and indifference, at the same time as envying more conservative groups who are quite vital. It is also a very individualistic religion – „A Unitarian is a person who in a lifetime of association



with other Unitarians never reveals his own religion,” said one of the respondents (Unitarians face a New Age 1936: 179). As a remedy some proposed a larger use of evangelistic techniques common to more orthodox churches; others looked for more articulate sharing of religious values with others (Unitarians face a New Age 1936: 180). However, using such methods or, even more, a dialogue with conservative Christians, always has been a controversial issue in Unitarianism. Debates in „The Inquirer“ (British Unitarian publication) during the visit of American evangelist Billy Graham to the UK in the 1970s is an example of that. „I am frequently amazed at the goodwill and tolerance of evangelical and other orthodox people towards us. We must allow for a two-way traffic system here“, wrote Martin Hall from Sherborne (Letters 1972a: 2). But there was another, more strict view – „surely the rational theology, social gospel and belief in the divinity of man for which our Movement stands is a direct challenge to the obscurantist and other-wordly evangelism of Billy Graham,“ wrote George W. Parkinson from Scarborough (Letters 1972b: 2).

Many British Unitarians would find it hard to accept songs of praise typical to those of the evangelical tradition as part of their worship. However, some are experimenting with these forms of music to attract young people. All Souls Non-Subscribing congregation in Belfast (part of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland, a sister denomination to British Unitarians) has a Jesus Praise Band made up of young people alienated by prejudice in evangelical circles (Corrigall 2011/2012: 12). It could be a way for other Unitarians to attract people coming from the evangelical tradition, including younger people who are not used to traditional organ music.

An inquiry group met in the UK from October 2007 to March 2008 – mostly Unitarians but also Quakers and a member of the „Sea of Faith“ network. They made a number of recommendations, among them „creative opportunities for worship outside of the Sunday a.m. or p. m. should be explored“; „the range of alternatives to formal worship should be explored e.g. meditation groups, retreats, congregational weekends, pilgrimages, shared meals“ (Millard 2011: 17). They also noted that „the role of acceptance (of those of any faith or none) might be the key to developing Unitarianism. However, it is currently a passive idea and one

which is tested every time someone new encounters a Unitarian group“ (Millard 2011: 8). By passive was meant a kind of shoulder-shrugging relativism.

Southport Unitarian Church in the UK in 1972 had a campaign „Bring a Friend Year“ that entailed the provision of several social events that might be of interest to non-members of the church and the provision at least once each month of special services. Attendance was better than in 1971 (More members 1972: 1). In 2015 „The Inquirer“ reported on Oldham Unitarian Chapel that Sunday services make good use of a large video screen, interspersing prayers, hymns and readings with clips from a wide variety of sources. Between Sundays the chapel is used as a café (Grant 2015: 9). The Unitarians in Southampton held a Guest Service – invitation cards were sent to hirers of the building and friends of the congregation (Knopf 2014: 10).

Like other churches, Unitarians are experimenting with organising congregation members into cell groups. These engagement groups – small groups within a congregation – meet regularly and are guided by an appointed facilitator, an agreed covenant and a clear structure. It is originally an American idea, whose genesis in the UK can be traced to the 2002 Essex Hall Lecture given by American theologian Thandeka (Lingwood 2008: 29). Margaret Kirk describes how it is done in her congregation in York: each session begins with an opening ritual – a few words, a chalice lighting, maybe some music. At the first session a covenant was established, enabling members of the group to decide how they wanted to be in relationship with each other (being punctual, respecting confidentiality, encouraging and welcoming new members). This was followed by a ‘check-in’, when participants introduced themselves and told the others anything about themselves that they wished to share. The check-in was followed by discussion of a chosen topic, or an activity, or maybe an exploration of issues that have arisen during the check-in itself. Each session finishes with a brief ‘check-out’ and a closing ritual of words or music (Smith 2006: 164).

There are also a number of study programmes designed for liberal churches but with a similar approach to the one used in more conservative groups. They are aimed at providing interested people, newcomers among them, with instruction in beliefs and practices of the religious group they

belong to, with learning together. For example, S. Lingwood has designed the course „The Unitarian Path“ – a six-session weekly course that identifies the different dimensions of the Unitarian tradition: Unitarians: A Progressive Spiritual Path; Jesus: A Liberal View; The Mystical Path; The Path of Thinking and Doubting; The Path of Justice and Inclusion; Many Paths up the Mountain: Religious Diversity (Lingwood 2008: 46; S. Lingwood has further elaborated his thoughts about Unitarian mission in Lingwood 2020). The emphasis for the course was on story-telling. The session started with listening and only then moved on to speaking. In the second half of the session, the speaking began. This consisted of two elements: a handout with writing from the Unitarian tradition on the particular subject of the session and an invited guest speaker who was Unitarian. S. Lingwood ran the course during his ministry as the student pastor of a Unitarian church in Manchester, which was organised in the local pub (Lingwood 2008: 47–49).

## CASE STUDIES

In this sub-chapter, we will analyse three selected congregations (mentioned in the introduction). In New Unity there were 21 persons who filled out questionnaires distributed by researchers before the service, 38 in Kingswood and 32 in Norwich.

New Unity in London defines itself as „radically inclusive“ meaning „each individual is welcome to bring their own beliefs and perspectives to our gatherings. We are a community open to and inclusive of a wide range of beliefs „from atheists to Zoroastrians““ (Beliefs). Radical inclusiveness was often mentioned as a core value by many respondents who filled out the questionnaire prepared by the authors of this article. The congregation does not use traditional religious language. It calls its worship services „Sunday gatherings“. The chapel has worship services during traditional church festivals like Christmas but it places them in the wider context of contemporary spirituality: „celebrate Christmas as a time to honour the miracle of every birth and its potential to bring more love and peace to our world“ (Christmas Eve advert 2014). The congregation offers a variety of programmes and events – for example, ballroom dancing,

Silent Meditation Group, choir, Newcomer Gathering, vegan event, Potluck Suppers, Teddy Bear's Picnic (for children and families) (New Unity events 2014). The congregation started to experience growth when Andy Pakula, an American, with a PhD in biology as well as training in theology and business, came to New Unity (then separate churches in Newington Green and Islington) at first as a student minister and from 2009 as a fully credentialed minister. After two years it grew from 35 members to more than 100 (Minister). Research conducted by the authors of this article shows that New Unity has a rather large proportion of congregants who are younger than 50 (33% of respondents 31–40, however only 9% 21–30). 50% of respondents have been attending for only 1–5 years, 25% for less than a year. Many of the respondents (41%) did not have any religious background before starting to attend New Unity.

Historically, Newington Green Unitarian Church (this old chapel is one of the locations New Unity uses for its events) is one of England's oldest Unitarian churches and has been tied to political radicalism. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century amongst its congregants was the early feminist Mary Wollstonecraft. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, under minister Cathal (Cal) Courtney, New Unity was involved in protests against the war in Iraq. In March 2008 Newington Green Unitarian Church became the first and only religious establishment in Britain to refuse to carry out any weddings at all, until all couples had equal marriage rights (Gruner 2008). The congregation continues that tradition of welcoming all, including persons identifying as LGBT. Currently, Unitarians are one of the few religious groups completely open to sexual minorities. It is a result of a process that was not always smooth if we take into account debates in the 1970s. For example, James Ashdown from Croydon wrote: „The prospect of a Unitarian or any other church – conducting a service of blessing on the union (whatever that may mean) of homosexuals would make me want to throw up not only my breakfast but my allegiance to that church“ (Letters 1971: 2).

Full acceptance of LGBT persons as members of New Unity is so obvious that when asked „How important is it that New Unity is supportive of sexual minorities?“ 75% answered „good, but not important.“ 28% of respondents stated that the fact that it is a „liberal, inclusive church“

is the reason for the attractiveness of the church. The next factor most frequently ticked by respondents was „friendly community“ (24%), followed by „good sermons“ (21%). It indicates the role of community in current religious life. It is a worldwide tendency – UUA surveys of its members show a sharp increase in the role attributed to the community. If, in 1967, 24% said the group experience of participation and worship was very important to them, in 1979 and 1987, 44% of respondents indicated that (Lee 1995: 386).

The Unitarian congregation in Kingswood is different from New Unity. It is a typical village church in the liberal Christian tradition. The last aspect of its identity is mentioned in the webpage of the church: „As a Christian church we look to Jesus as our great example, and to the Bible for inspiration“ (About Us). It also influences the way people view their spiritual development; it was Kingswood where one person responded to the open-ended question „how has your participation in the congregation changed you?“ in our questionnaire by saying „more aware of Christian values.“ The congregation still celebrates a regular communion service done in a traditional way with bread and wine, which is no longer a common practice among Unitarians. During the Sunday worship service it has Bible readings and among its activities is also the weekly Bible study. Formal members numbered 29 in July 2005, 63 in July 2015. There is a slight decrease in membership (74 in July 2014, 63 in July 2015) because in 2014–2015 the congregation created a separate list for non-active members (Caddick 2015).

The minister leading this congregation previous to Anthony Howe (minister during the research done by authors of this article, currently Ministry Tutor at Unitarian College) was Keith Hill, who served for 40 years. He was a part-time minister. There were times in those years when the congregation numbered only 1 or 2 persons. Kingswood as a congregation has really grown in the last ten years (Caddick 2015). Pastor A. Howe mentions as sources of growth rites of passage (weddings, funerals, baptisms); increased visibility in the community and a better reputation; one-to-one connections and midweek activities (Howe 23.10.2015). The church has a lot of activities – a regular coffee morning, craft groups and social events (a quiz at Halloween, for example). The Heritage Open Days (England’s biggest heritage festival) is one of the

occasions the congregation uses to make itself known to the wider public. The pastor of the church thinks that Kingswood is the only Unitarian church in England to have a Boys' Brigade (adapted for the Unitarian context). In the past Boys' Brigade (founded in 1883 with a Nonconformist leaning) was an expression of „muscular Christianity“ that stressed the role of disciplining the body (Brown 2006: 55). This organisation has changed over the years but still, as stated in its webpage, the object of the brigade is „the advancement of Christ's kingdom among Boys and the promotion of habits of Obedience, Reverence, Discipline, Self-respect and all that tends towards a true Christian manliness“ (Introduction). Kingswood is a popular retirement area; therefore, the average age of respondents is 71 and above (57% of respondents). The main reasons for the attractiveness of the church for respondents are the friendly community (41%) and inspiring worship (40%). Most of the respondents mentioned as core values ethical aspects of faith like friendship, caring for others, love and openness.

The Octagon Chapel (Norwich) used to be Presbyterian but in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the congregation, like many other Presbyterian churches, became Unitarian. Its chapel (Octagon) was described by John Wesley as „perhaps the most elegant one in Europe“ (Barringer 1984: 178). At the time of the 1851 census, it still had good attendance numbers – 491 persons attended Sunday morning service on 30 March of that year. However, compared with other Nonconformists (Baptists, Methodists and Independents) this number was rather small (Barringer 1984: 178–179). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the congregation has been able to keep its membership and attendance numbers, even if there is no significant growth. Average attendance for 2010 had been 41 (maximum 61, once for a christening and once for a carol concert), for 2015 the average attendance was 42 (maximum 74, at a remembrance service) (Palfrey 2015a). In 2015 paid-up membership of Octagon was 51 and an estimated total number of individuals who attended at some time during the year was approaching 80. In Octagon an equal number of respondents (25%) belong to the age group 71 and above and to the age group 61–70. This congregation in Norwich, like the one in Kingswood, has a substantial number of former Anglicans (54% in Kingswood and 26% in Norwich). The main reasons for the attractiveness of the church for respondents are

that it is a liberal, inclusive church (28%) and it has inspiring worship (28%).

Like the two other case studies, Octagon has many ongoing activities – concerts, lectures, a meditation group, a poetry group, etc. The congregation raises money through the Octagon Concert Series for a variety of charities and good causes (Amnesty International, Support for UK Prisoners, Nepal in Need, etc.) (Rae 2015; Report 2015b). These concerts are not a direct way of proselytising; however, they provide the congregation with visibility. The congregation is making use also of Heritage Open Days – in 2015 it welcomed 807 visitors, compared to 704 in 2014 (Heritage Open Days 2015).

The congregation differs from the two previously described Unitarian congregations in not having a permanent minister. The congregation considers it a strength: „we believe that our success is due in large part to having a different service leader every Sunday. ... It is essential for members of the congregation to be able and willing to lead services. This presents a great challenge, and members of our congregation have responded superbly. We encourage innovation and risks in enabling service leaders to introduce new ways of doing things and new insights on all sorts of topics“ (Palfrey 2015b). The congregation does not position itself as representing a particular tradition of Unitarianism. Respondents mentioned as core values of the congregation various aspects typical to Unitarian thinking – universal oneness of humankind and tolerance. Some mentioned as a value distancing themselves from traditional Christian perspectives – „Jesus is a myth, nothing but a good story“, „largely non-theistic presentation.“ The worship service, at least as experienced by the authors of this article, is non-theistic. Readings were from various sources, God was not mentioned in the liturgy. At the same time, the congregation in its activities draws also from the Christian tradition; in November 2015 a workshop and meditation on Julian of Norwich was offered.

## CONCLUSION

Common denominators of numerical growth in three congregations which otherwise are very different from each other analysed as case studies in this article are: community-building; weekly activities that involve people; good public image; people enthusiastic about their work in the congregation (minister's personality plays an important role but this is not a crucial factor because Norwich is growing but does not have a permanent minister). There are additional factors like Kingswood's being the only liberal congregation in its area and therefore the chapel does not have competitors in the „market of religions“. In Norwich, the Sunday Assemblies, the gathering designed mostly for non-religious people who want a similar communal experience to a religious community, existed from 2014 to 2019 (Sunday Assembly Norwich). Unitarian D. McAuley looks positively to learning from the Sunday Assembly movement and possible cooperation – „greater understanding of the changing pattern of religion and belief in Great Britain is certainly a key issue for us as we look to the future“ (McAuley 2013: 7). Time will tell how it will influence the attendance at Unitarian churches, especially in areas like Norwich where they compete with a relatively small target audience (compared with a metropolis like London).

In Octagon and Kingswood the majority of people stated that it is important for them that the congregation is Unitarian, so it seems denominational identity still plays a significant role, or at least we can say that respondents have learned to appreciate that identity. In New Unity, the Unitarian identity is less important: 57% of respondents stated that either they do not care about New Unity being Unitarian or that it is unimportant to them.

All three congregations have problems with reaching young people (New Unity has a larger number of young people than the other two congregations but still it has few people under 30). As in congregations of many denominations, most of the attendees in the three selected congregations are women (in New Unity 67%, in Kingswood 67%, in Norwich 59%).

As discovered during the research, Unitarians have attracted some people who felt that congregations they have been part of are too one-



sided in their approach to worship services and have concentrated only on the style and music of young „urban tribes“ or simply Christian pop music. In Kingswood, we met some former Baptists who left their church after it moved to a contemporary worship style. They felt that their needs were not being met.

Whatever is the target audience of a particular worshipping community, it is a common trend that people are interested in the emotional side of worship. For them, it is not only an intellectual exercise. As the religious sociologist Grace Davie writes, „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“ (Davie 2013: 149).

This research also shows that all three congregations analysed here are attracting a particular audience. No congregation can be friendly and attractive to all people because it could mean that in the end it would not be attractive to anybody. As Lyle E. Schaller, an American church consultant, stated: „Every congregation, by its actions and programs, causes some people to feel excluded (...) The congregation that claims it is trying to reach everyone in its efforts to grow is engaged in a venture guaranteed to produce frustration, disappointment, and unfulfilled goals.“ (Hoge, Roozen 1978: 346–347)

The future of Unitarian congregations lies not in simply becoming nontheist or keeping a liberal Christian identity but in understanding their audience in the local context and serving their needs, being not just an equivalent of a social or human rights network. Members of the Executive Committee of the General Assembly of the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches have expressed it well: „If we are to be a faith that matters to both society and to the individual, we should recognise that we are first and foremost a faith community; social action, whilst part of who we are, is not our primary purpose“ (The Executive Committee’s 2015).

There is no single „golden key“ to church growth. People are diverse in what they are looking for. Religious liberals know very well how to deconstruct dominant practices of their traditions and how to apply a hermeneutic of suspicion. They are not doing so well in offering new constructive alternatives; therefore, some cases of numerical growth do not change the overall picture of decline. However, the three case

studies analysed in this article show it is not impossible. Congregations will experience growth in places where there is genuine excitement about what members of these communities believe and what they do, and where there is an environment in which to talk about life experiences openly.

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## Eestikeelne kokkuvõte

### Pilguheit Briti unitaaride kogudustele: toimetulek kahanemisega ja kasvuvõimaluste otsimine

Artikli autorid analüüsivad, miks üldiselt kahaneva liikmeskonnaga unitaaride liikumise mõned kogudused kasvavad. Uurimus põhineb nii kirjalike allikate analüüsil kui ka 2015. aastal kolmes Suurbritannia unitaaride koguduses läbi viidud välitööl, mis hõlmas intervjuusid, küsimustikke, fookusgrupe ja pühapäevastel teenistustel osalemist. Projekti rahastas Hibbert Trust. Kolmes muidu üksteisest väga erinevas koguduses ilmnemise mõned ühised liikmeskonna kasvu põhjused: rõhuasetus kogukonnatunde tugevdamisel, lai valik iganädalasi tegevusi, hea avalik maine ja kogudusetööd innukalt tegevate inimeste olemasolu (pastori isiksus on samuti oluline, kuid mitte peamine tegur). Leidus ka täiendavaid põhjuseid, näiteks ollakse piirkonna ainus liberaalne kogudus ja seetõttu puuduvad „religioonitorul“ konkurendid. Tegemist on ka kogudustega, mis ei ole jäänud kinni unitarismi valgustusaegsesse pärandisse. Uuringud näitasid sedagi, et unitaaridel on õnnestunud ligi tõmmata inimesi, kes on rahulolematud oma seniste usugruppidega. Nii ei ole need konkreetsed näited vastuolus ka üldise suundumusega, mille kohaselt on liberaalsed usugrupid (nende seas unitaarid) edukad oma religiooni sees valitsevaks kujunenud uskumuste ja tavade dekonstrueerimisel ning kahtluse hermeneutika rakendamisel, kuid samal ajal on neil raskusi uute konstruktiivsete alternatiivide pakkumisel.

## Märksõnad

unitarism · sekulariseerumine · koguduse kasv · Suurbritannia