

‘Companions in sufferings both in our owne & a strange land’: Norfolk Exiles in the Low Countries and the Formation of East Anglian Nonconformity

JOEL HALCOMB

University of East Anglia

Abstract

This article explores the experiences of a group of Norfolk puritans who, seeking religious freedom, fled to the Low Countries in the late 1630s, were exposed to congregationalism in the English Reformed Church in Rotterdam, and then returned to their former homes at the start of the English civil wars to oversee the foundation of the congregational church movement in East Anglia. The experience of exile formed a strong bond among these Norfolk puritans, one attached to their newfound congregationalism. The cultures of dispute resolution and toleration of adult baptism found in the Rotterdam church would have a profound effect on the later churches of East Anglia.

In 1642 a group of Norfolk puritan exiles, who had sought refuge in Rotterdam during the late 1630s, returned home amid the growing turmoil of the British revolutions. They had left the county during the Laudian, anti-puritan episcopal reforms that had developed under Charles I’s Church of England.¹ Taking advantage of the breakdown in ecclesiastical discipline and political instability that emerged in the early months of the Long Parliament, where the episcopal state Church and the church court systems that guarded it were dismantled ‘root and branch’,² they resolved to further ‘the light they now saw’ by gathering ‘into Churchfellowship with all convenient speed where God should please to direct them’.³ Within two years, they had established two of the earliest ‘congregational’ churches in England, at Norwich and Great Yarmouth.⁴

The gathering of these sorts of voluntary churches outside the episcopal Church of England has long been part of the story of the civil wars and revolution that engulfed the British Isles in the middle of the seventeenth century. The birth and establishment

I would like to thank Christopher Joby, Eliza Hartrich, Edward Legon and attendees at the ‘British History in the Seventeenth Century’ seminar at the Institute for Historical Research, London for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

¹ For the most recent account of Laudianism, see Peter Lake, *On Laudianism: Piety, Polemic and Politics During the Personal Rule of Charles I* (Cambridge, 2023). The classic account is Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism c. 1590–1640* (Oxford, 1990).

² On the early church reforms of the Long Parliament, the classic study is John Morrill, ‘The attack on the Church of England in the Long Parliament, 1640–1642’, in Derek Beales, Edward Dawson and Geoffrey Best (eds), *History, Society and the Churches: Essays in Honour of Owen Chadwick* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 105–24. More recent studies include: Elliot Vernon, *London Presbyterians and the British Revolutions, 1638–64* (Manchester, 2021), chs 1–4; Anthony Milton, *England’s Second Reformation: The Battle for the Church of England, 1625–1662* (Cambridge, 2021), chs 4–7.

³ Norfolk Record Office (hereafter NRO), FC19/1, ‘Norwich Old Meeting Congregational Church Book’, fo. 1r and FC31/1, ‘Great Yarmouth, Middlegate Congregational Church Book, 1643–1855’, fo. 1r. Both of these volumes are unpaginated, except for the opening pages. References hereafter will be given by entry date rather than foliation.

⁴ This article consciously uses lower case for ‘congregational’, ‘baptist’, ‘presbyterian’ and variations thereof to separate emerging groups in the mid-seventeenth century from later institutional churches under those names.

of new religious movements, and their spread into Scotland and Ireland, created the first multi-church, multi-faith society in British history and helped to permanently destroy medieval assumptions that a nation should worship together in one faith.⁵ Controversies over the existence of these new groups (all of which emerged from godly puritan communities) fractured the parliamentary cause during the civil wars, raised questions about religious toleration and ultimately forestalled parliamentary efforts to settle a reformed national Church of England both during and after the civil wars. These dynamics have ensured, both at the time and in historical assessments since, that although the gathered churches of the British revolutions were relatively few in number, their historical significance was profound.⁶

Within this religious turmoil, congregational churches, like those that gathered in Norwich and Great Yarmouth, stood on the boundaries of religious orthodoxy. They professed a broad Calvinist doctrine, like most English puritans, but departed sharply from the mainstream in their ecclesiology: Their churches practiced independently of any outside ecclesiastical oversight and were democratically run; they only allowed the godly ('visible saints', as they called them) to be 'members' and partake in the sacraments of communion and baptism; and their congregations were gathered irrespective of parish boundaries, dissolving one of the core structures of medieval and early modern community. Although congregationalists defended their orthodoxy in public, their churches often harboured a wide range of theological views and often gave birth to more radical individuals. They were the most successful and consequential of the revolution's gathered church movements, rising to power under Oliver Cromwell to wield heavy influence on national affairs.⁷

While this broader picture is well known, the Norfolk congregational movement merits further consideration, for while we know a lot about the importance of congregationalists to the political and religious debates of the revolution, we know far less about how gathered churches of this kind emerged in local communities. No other group of early gathered churches is as well documented before, during and after the civil wars, as the Norwich and Yarmouth congregationalists. Pre-civil war religious politics in Norwich and Yarmouth are well studied and surviving lists for passengers travelling abroad from Great Yarmouth into the Dutch Republic between 1637 and 1639 allow us to trace the names, origins and occupations of émigrés at exactly the moment when Norfolk puritans were leaving their homeland to escape Laudian reforms.⁸ Upon their return from 1642, these exiles kept fulsome records of the churches they founded in Norwich and Great Yarmouth. The church books

⁵ On toleration in England, see John Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England, 1558–1689* (London, 2000); Alexandra Walsham, *Charitable Hatred: Tolerance and Intolerance in England, 1500–1700* (Manchester, 2006); and Blair Worden, *God's Instruments: Political Conduct in the England of Oliver Cromwell* (Oxford, 2013), ch. 3.

⁶ The literature here is substantial. For dissenting history, the best recent survey is John Coffey (ed.), *The Oxford History of Protestant Dissenting Traditions: Volume 1: The Post-Reformation Era, c.1559–c.1689* (Oxford, 2020). On the gathered churches of the revolution Murray Tolmie's *The Triumph of the Saints: The Separate Church of London, 1616–1649* (Cambridge, 1977) remains one of the best surveys. I use 'British revolutions', instead of 'English Revolution', to indicate the interconnected nature of the religious, cultural, political and military conflicts in Scotland, Ireland and England in the mid-seventeenth century.

⁷ On congregationalism, see Geoffrey Nuttall, *Visible Saints: The Congregational Way, 1640–1660* (Oxford, 1957); Joel Halcomb, 'A social history of congregational religious practice during the puritan revolution' (PhD thesis, Cambridge, 2010); and for a recent survey, Tim Cooper, 'Congregationalists', in Coffey, *Protestant Dissenting Traditions*, pp. 88–112.

⁸ Matthew Reynolds, *Godly Reformers and Their Opponents in Early Modern England: Religion in Norwich, c.1560–1643* (Woodbridge, 2005); Richard Cust, 'Anti-puritanism and urban politics: Charles I and Great Yarmouth', *Historical Journal*, 35/1 (1992), 1–26; Charles B. Jewson (ed.), *Transcript of Three Registers of Passengers from Great Yarmouth to Holland and New England, 1637–1639* (Norwich, 1964). I have checked Jewson's transcriptions with the originals in The National Archives, E157/21, 'Exchequer Licenses to Pass Beyond Seas, 1637', and E157/22, 'Exchequer Licenses to Pass Beyond Seas, 1638'.

of these two churches are some of the fullest surviving congregational records for the mid-seventeenth century.⁹ They list members' names, outline the development of their religious practices and contain a huge amount of information about meetings and correspondences with neighbouring churches that emerged throughout Norfolk and Suffolk.

These sources enable us to rethink two key aspects of revolutionary congregationalism. First, the leadership of the Norwich and Yarmouth churches within the East Anglian congregational movement in its formative first two decades has been acknowledged but little characterized. Yet analysis of the oversight by these two churches of the emerging churches in the region exposes the social formation of religious organization and the spread and mediation of religious beliefs during one of the most dynamic and turbulent periods of religious change in British history. Scholars of dissent and nonconformity have only recently begun to explore the 'lived religion' of early dissent and the religious movements of the revolution.¹⁰ This article contributes to that trend within the scholarship on religious dissent by highlighting both the social processes that affected the gathering of new congregational churches in Norfolk and Suffolk during the mid-seventeenth century and how emergent religious practices were mediated through dynamic church networks.

Second, the founders of the Norwich and Great Yarmouth congregational churches had all experienced congregationalism for the first time during their exile in the Dutch Republic, as members of the English Reformed Church of Rotterdam, which had been remodelled into a congregational church in 1633. In joining this particular church, these Norfolk puritan exiles became engaged in what Keith Sprunger, in his detailed study of English puritans in the Netherlands, described as 'the most theologically innovative of the English churches' in the Low Countries.¹¹ During the 1630s the Rotterdam church became, as Geoffrey Nuttall phrased it, a 'nursery' of future clerical leaders of the congregational movement in colonial New England and revolutionary Britain.¹² The Norfolk historian Charles B. Jewson called the church 'the mother of Congregational Dissent in Norfolk'.¹³

This article does not seek to overturn these insights – far from it – rather, the influence of early congregationalism in the Dutch Republic on the later English movement has been more assumed than shown. Too often the significance of the Rotterdam church, and its sister church in Arnhem, has been reduced to noting that the principal defenders of the congregational way in England during the British revolutions, a group collectively known as the 'dissenting brethren', first experienced congregationalism in Rotterdam and Arnhem. Little direct analysis has been made between practices they experienced in the Dutch Republic and those that developed in England immediately after exile. Little to nothing has been said about the laymen and women who joined them and their influence over later developments. As we shall see, distinct characteristics of the congregational movement in East Anglia – their regular use of inter-church conferences or assemblies and their toleration of baptists

⁹ NRO, FC19/1 and FC31/1. On church books, see Mark Burden and Anne Dunan-Page, 'Puritans, dissenters, and their church books: recording and representing experience', *Bunyan Studies*, 20 (2016), pp. 14–32.

¹⁰ While the phrase 'lived religion' might understandably beg questions about when religion is not 'lived', I use it here to indicate a more socially and culturally informed analysis of the relationships between religious beliefs, practice and fellowship. For a discussion, see Michael Davies, Anne Dunan-Page and Joel Halcomb, 'Introduction: gathered church life and the experience of dissent', in Davies, Dunan-Page and Halcomb (eds), *Church Life: Pastors, Congregations, and the Experience of Dissent in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford, 2019), pp. 20–4.

¹¹ Sprunger, *Dutch Puritanism*, p. 173.

¹² Nuttall, *Visible Saints*, p. 15.

¹³ Charles B. Jewson, 'The English Church at Rotterdam and its Norfolk connections', *Norfolk Archaeology*, 30/4 (1952), p. 324.

– can be traced back to the practices of the English Reformed Church in Rotterdam during the late 1630s.

An important corollary to this analysis relates to the impact of exile on Norfolk's early congregationalists. Exile was fundamental to the construction of the congregational way. The disruption of migration to foreign and strange lands perhaps inevitably emphasized the themes of religious purity and intense communal piety at the heart of the congregational vision of the church. Congregationalism was largely born among puritans abroad. The first substantial growth of congregational churches began in colonial New England, where thousands of English men, women and children fled during the 'Great Migration' of the 1630s.¹⁴ The development of practices there created some of the most substantial codifications and defences of congregationalism during the seventeenth century. From the early 1640s, congregationalism was often known as 'the New England way' and New England ministers like John Cotton would continue throughout the revolution to be cited in Britain and Ireland as key architects of congregationalism.¹⁵ At the same time that these codifications were taking place in colonial New England, English exiles in the Low Countries, taking advantage of the religious liberties fostered by the new Dutch Republic, were also experimenting with congregational politics. In the early seventeenth century, early congregational thinkers like Henry Jacob and William Ames had spent significant periods of their career there, as did a host of ministers who immigrated to New England.¹⁶ The Dutch Republic likewise gave refuge to the congregationalist dissenting brethren. These five English ministers – Thomas Goodwin, Philip Nye, Jeremiah Burroughs, William Bridge and Sidrach Simpson – oversaw the English Reformed churches in Arnhem and Rotterdam, and upon their return to England they would have a 'disproportionate impact' on national church reform throughout the revolution.¹⁷ The formulation of the congregational way among these displaced puritan refugees in New England and the Low Countries has meant the fundamental structures of the congregationalism – its voluntary, democratic gathering of self-identifying godly – seems inseparably linked to the experience of exile.

The East Anglian churches provide us with an opportunity to explore the impact of exile on the practical application of congregational beliefs. As 'companions in sufferings both in our owne & a strange land', the returned Norfolk exiles explicitly maintained a social and religious bond attached to the particular practices they encountered abroad.¹⁸ In contrast to elite royalists who fled Britain and Ireland during the civil wars and interregnum, or regicides who escaped abroad after the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy, Norfolk's puritan exiles migrated as a community, to and

¹⁴ Susan Hardman Moore, *Pilgrims: New World Settlers and the Call of Home* (New Haven, CT, 2010); Michael Winship, *Godly Republicans: Puritans, Pilgrims, and a City on a Hill* (Cambridge, MA, 2013); Virginia DeJohn Anderson, *New England's Generation: The Great Migration and the Formation of Society and Culture in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1991).

¹⁵ For example, Joel Halcomb, 'The association movement and the politics of church settlement during the interregnum', in Elliot Vernon and Hunter Powell (eds), *Church Polity and Politics in the British Atlantic World, c. 1635–66* (Manchester, 2020), pp. 188–90.

¹⁶ The best study of English and Scottish exiles in the seventeenth-century Low Countries remains Keith Sprunger, *Dutch Puritanism: A History of English and Scottish Churches of the Netherlands in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Leiden, 1982).

¹⁷ Hunter Powell, *The Crisis of British Protestantism: Church Power in the Puritan Revolution, 1638–44* (Manchester, 2015), p. 3. On the size of the congregational movement, see Halcomb, 'Congregational religious practice', ch. 1. On their influence, in addition to Powell, see most recently Milton, *Second Reformation*, pp. 192, 219–20, 236, 305–6; Ann Hughes, 'The Cromwellian church', in Anthony Milton (ed.), *The Oxford History of Anglicanism: Volume I: Reformation and Identity, c. 1520–1662* (Oxford, 2017), p. 445; and also Halcomb, 'Congregational religious practice', ch. 8.

¹⁸ NRO, FC19/1: 24 May 1644.

from Rotterdam. As relative commoners, they did not leave substantial literary reflections on their time abroad. Yet exile created a deep bond among them, a bond we can trace through actions as they set about to building a movement around the new 'light' they discovered abroad.

I

As this special journal issue highlights, interaction between Norfolk and the Low Countries has a long history, with trade in particular keeping Norfolk men and women regularly travelling between and living in both regions. English religious refugees had fled to the Low Countries since at least the reign of Mary I, but it was the establishment of a religiously tolerant Dutch Republic during their revolt against the Spanish that helped to create a multi-confessional society that welcomed British religious dissenters.¹⁹ The result was a series of official and unofficial English churches abiding in the Dutch Republic from the late 16th century, facilitating theological and ecclesiological creativity not openly possible to puritans in England. Some of England's first separatists, under the leadership of Robert Browne and Robert Harrison, escaped to Middelburg in 1582.²⁰ A second separatist congregation, led by Francis Johnson, fled to Amsterdam in 1593 and eventually relocated to Leiden, worshipping next door to John Robinson's church, who soon headed to America to establish Plymouth Colony.²¹ The first English general baptist congregation took shape in Amsterdam.²² The Dutch Republic hosted a number of English congregations, most famously John Paget's church in Amsterdam which practiced and sustained forms of presbyterianism between the clampdown on the Elizabethan presbyterian movement in the 1590s and the Westminster Assembly's settlement of the 1640s.²³

Within all this diversity, the English Reformed churches at Rotterdam and Arnhem stood apart in their influence over later congregational practices in England. We know less about the church in Arnhem. Described by Keith Sprunger as 'the most prestigious colony-in-exile to be found in the Netherlands', it boasted various knights and gentlemen from Yorkshire, Huntingdonshire and Essex. The group had fled to the Low Countries in 1637 and had established a church in Arnhem by 1638. It was ministered to by John Archer and two of the dissenting brethren, Thomas Goodwin and Philip Nye.²⁴ The English Reformed Church at Rotterdam has the longer, more storied history of the two, beginning in 1619 after some years' petitioning by local English settlers and with the backing of the English ambassador Sir Dudley Carleton.²⁵ Though originally organized around presbyterian practices, the church's second pastor, Hugh Peter, a Cornish puritan minister who had sought refuge and employment in the Low Countries after he was suspended by the bishop of London

¹⁹ See R. Po-Chia Hsia and Henk Van Nierop (eds), *Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age* (Cambridge, 2002).

²⁰ For a recent survey of separatists, see: Michael Haykin, 'Separatists and Baptists', in Coffey, *Protestant Dissenting Traditions*, pp. 113–38. On Browne, see B.R. White, *The English Separatist Tradition: From the Marian Martyrs to the Pilgrim Fathers* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 44–66; Winship, *Godly Republicanism*, pp. 46–51.

²¹ Winship, *Godly Republicanism*, chs 3–5 provides the best recent account of the Leiden church and Plymouth Colony.

²² Stephen Wright, *The Early English Baptists, 1603–1649* (Woodbridge, 2006), pp. 20–44; Haykin, 'Separatists and Baptists', pp. 118–22.

²³ Polly Ha, *English Presbyterianism, 1590–1640* (Stanford, 2010), pp. 56–9, 144–77; Alice Carter, *The English Reformed Church in Amsterdam in the Seventeenth Century* (Amsterdam, 1964).

²⁴ Sprunger, *Dutch Puritanism*, pp. 226–32; Bremer, *Congregational Communion*, pp. 98–9. It is not clear why the group settled in Arnhem.

²⁵ Sprunger, *Dutch Puritanism*, p. 162.

in 1628, reformed the church into a congregational structure in 1633. Peter instituted a church covenant, which all members had to sign up to, and congregational discipline where full members voted on matters of the church. His reforms also required members – those who were allowed access to the sacraments – to be vetted for their godliness.²⁶ Peter, it seems, was inspired to experiment with congregational forms by his friend, Dr William Ames, an exiled English theologian at Franeker in Frisia. In the midst of Peter's reforms, Ames resigned his professorship at the University of Franeker to join Peter as his assistant only to die soon after arriving in Rotterdam.²⁷

The church must have gained some fame among puritan circles, for throughout the 1630s various puritan ministers, deprived by the Laudian regime back home, spent time in Rotterdam. Soon-to-be New England leaders Thomas Hooker, Samuel Eaton and John Davenport visited Peter in Rotterdam during his pastorate, with Davenport taking up a ministerial position alongside him.²⁸ Throughout 1636, most of these men left for America but by mid-year the church experienced another wave of immigrant ministers, this time from Norfolk where Bishop Matthew Wren had been forcing the diocese into strict conformity to Laudian church reforms.²⁹ John Ward, William Bridge, Thomas Allen, Edward Wale, William Greenhill and Jeremiah Burroughes were all deprived by Wren and would spend time in Rotterdam.³⁰ Although original letters have not survived, there is evidence that these men sent regular correspondence back to their networks in England.³¹

Laymen and women also became aware of the church and emigrated. A letter written by Bridge from Rotterdam to leading lay puritans in Norfolk, from which snippets survive, criticized episcopal government as anti-Christian and encouraged migration.³² Historians have shown how immigration to New England often coincided with the imposition of Laudian church reforms in their English parishes.³³ The same pattern seems to hold for Norfolk. In surviving lists for passengers travelling abroad from Great Yarmouth between 1637 and 1639, at least sixty-two travellers to the Low Countries later joined the Norwich and Great Yarmouth congregational churches.³⁴ Over half of these (thirty-four) were women. The age distribution was fairly balanced, with twenty-nine travellers in their 20s or 30s, nine under 20, ten in their 40s and five 50 or older. These émigrés were often families of working age, some travelling with children, and most came from fairly affluent backgrounds. The men, who have their occupation listed, covered a range of trades (apothecary, grocer, cordwainer,

²⁶ Sprunger, *Dutch Puritanism*, pp. 162–7. On Peter, see Raymond Phineas Stearns, *The Strenuous Puritan: Hugh Peter, 1598–1660* (Urbana, IL, 1954).

²⁷ Keith Sprunger, *The Learned Doctor William Ames: Dutch Backgrounds of English and American Puritanism* (Chicago, 1972), pp. 92, 199–200, 205, 241–3.

²⁸ Davenport's time in Rotterdam is traced in Francis Bremer, *Building a New Jerusalem: John Davenport, a Puritan in Three Worlds* (New Haven, CT, 2012), ch. 9.

²⁹ Sprunger, *Dutch Puritanism*, pp. 166–8; Bremer, *Congregational Communion*, pp. 54, 94–5, 97, 119; Reynolds, *Godly Reformers*, pp. 157–235.

³⁰ Reynolds, *Godly Reformers*, pp. 191–2, 220; Sprunger, *Dutch Puritanism*, pp. 168, 172.

³¹ Thomas Edwards, *Antapologia: Or, a full answer to the Apologeticall Narration* (1644), pp. sig. A2r, 17–8, 35, 44–6, 99, 114; W. H. D. Longstaffe (ed.), *Memoirs of the Life of Mr. Ambrose Barnes*, Surtees Society, 50 (Durham, 1866), pp. 131–2; Bremer, *Congregational Communion*, pp. 54, 94–5, 97, 119.

³² Edwards, *Antapologia*, pp. 17–8, 45–6, 114. For a similar letter from an exile to the godly in Norwich, in this case from New England from a layman, see Michael Metcalfe, 'To all the true professors of Christs Gospel within the city of Norwich, 13 Jan 1637', *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, 16 (1862), pp. 279–84.

³³ A recent survey of this substantial body of literature can be found in Hardman Moore, *Pilgrims*, pp. 21–6. David Cressy, in *Coming Over: Migration and Communication between England and New England in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1987), and Kevin Sharpe, in *The Personal Rule of Charles I* (New Haven, CT, 1996), pp. 751–5, have both argued that puritanism and Laudian persecution had little to do with the timing of migrants. The wealth of detailed studies cited in Hardman Moore confirm otherwise.

³⁴ The following information is compiled from Jewson, *Transcripts*; NRO, FC19/1; and NRO, FC31/1. Discussions can also be found in: Jewson, 'English Church at Rotterdam', p. 334; Reynolds, *Godly Reformers*, p. 229.

limner, tailor and goldsmith) but weavers dominated, with 10 of the 24 men in the textile industry.³⁵ The accounts also often list later church members next to each other, suggesting that people travelled in family and friendship groups. Later members James Gedney, Anne Coball, Sisley Rayner and Judith Leverington all travelled together, along with Thomas Rayner, brother-in-law to Judith's husband John Leverington. John Leverington went to Rotterdam earlier, no doubt to report back on the viability of emigrating. All three men were weavers, aged 19–23.³⁶ Francis and Elizabeth Hillen travelled with his mother, Anne Wright, and another later congregationalist, Mary Fen.³⁷ These passenger accounts give a sense of the span of the local puritan network and some of its nodes, which were based on family, trade and friendship. They also suggest that these puritans faced the challenges of emigration together, congregating in the city of Rotterdam where existing connections could help facilitate their livelihood in a new country. Whether they used existing contacts among the Dutch strangers in Norwich, or long-standing merchant links, is not immediately clear.

What practices did they experience in the Rotterdam church? We have only a partial picture from imperfect sources. The records of the church have not survived between Peter's pastorate and 1653 when Thomas Cawton, a presbyterian minister who fled to the Low Countries in 1651, took over the pastorate and began keeping records of baptisms and marriages.³⁸ Most of what we know about the church in the 1630s and 1640s comes from hostile accounts. English authorities were kept abreast of the church's reforms through various informants like the English ambassador Sir William Boswell and the Laudian minister Stephen Goffe.³⁹ The church's practices also became a point of contention within the religious politics of the mid-1640s, sparking lengthy printed hostile commentaries and defences. In the *Apologetical Narration* (London, 1644), the dissenting brethren used their practices in the Arnhem and Rotterdam churches as a cornerstone of their defence of the congregational way.⁴⁰ Presbyterian respondents attacked this record, citing letters, manuscripts and word-of-mouth reports that had filtered into England from the late 1630s.⁴¹ The most detailed critique came from Thomas Edwards, the presbyterian polemicist most famous for his eclectic and voluminous multi-edition *Gangraena*.⁴² Edwards's earlier publication, *Antapologia* (London, 1644), was a systematic engagement with the *Narration* focusing extensively on the dissenting brethren's time in Holland. Edwards claimed access to numerous letters, manuscripts and reports sent from English exiles in Rotterdam and Arnhem from the late 1630s and early 1640s, in addition to personal discussions with two of the dissenting brethren, Thomas Goodwin and William Bridge, whom he knew well from his Cambridge days.⁴³ These contacts and sources lend some credence to the specific details found in Edwards' account, even if his polemical writing shaped conclusions that the exiles themselves disagreed with.

³⁵ Defending himself to parliamentary authorities in the 1640s, Bishop Wren blamed migration out of Norfolk during his tenure on depressed wages among weavers, rather than genuine religious motives. The group traced here were clearly part of a pre-existing puritan network, attracted by Bridge's invitation to experience 'pure' worship abroad, and all determined to go to Rotterdam. On Wren, see Sharpe, *Personal Rule*, pp. 754–5.

³⁶ Jewson, *Transcripts*, pp. 19, 34.

³⁷ Jewson, *Transcripts*, p. 36.

³⁸ Sprunger, *Dutch Puritanism*, pp. 166, 174; Thomas Cawton, *The life and death of that holy and reverend man of God Mr Thomas Cawton* (London, 1662), pp. 51–2.

³⁹ See BL, Add. MS 6394-5; TNA, SP14, SP16, SP18, SP29, SP83, SP84. Some of these sources have been printed in Champlin Burrage, *The Early English Dissenters in the Light of Recent Research (1550–1641)* (1912), ch. 17.

⁴⁰ Thomas Goodwin et al, *The Apologetical Narration* (1644).

⁴¹ The debate has most recently been covered in Vernon, *London Presbyterians*, pp. 94–9.

⁴² On Edwards and *Gangraena* see Ann Hughes' *Gangraena and the Struggle for the English Revolution* (Oxford, 2004).

⁴³ Edwards, *Antapologia*, preface, sig. [A4]^r, 96.

Finally, a useful report dated 26 November 1641, compiled by the Dutch Reformed Consistory of Rotterdam after an investigation into the practices of the English Reformed Church in the city, survives, giving us a snapshot of the recent history of the church, including brief commentary on some of the divisions at the heart of the pamphlet debates between the dissenting brethren and their presbyterian opponents.⁴⁴ Though partial and often problematic, the evidence we have of the practices exiles experienced in Rotterdam can be related to the developing congregational movement in East Anglia during the 1640s and 1650s.

Hugh Peter's congregational reformation began in early 1633 when he restructured the English Reformed Church in Rotterdam around a new church covenant. The foundation of all congregational churches was the church covenant.⁴⁵ Covenant-making culture was already established in the Low Countries, according to Keith Sprunger, with examples found in Middelburg (1623) and Amsterdam (about 1631).⁴⁶ Some English puritans had also experimented with covenants, and Sir William Boswell, English ambassador to the Dutch Republic during the 1630s, connected Peter's church covenant with the more informal covenant organized by John White in Dorchester.⁴⁷ But Peter's main inspiration for a church covenant almost certainly came from the development of covenantal theology in the work of his friend William Ames, who had published on the topic in 1627 and 1630.⁴⁸

Peter's new covenant immediately caused a stir. It was 'made with certaine precise & strict obligacions' and only those putting their hand to this new covenant could partake in the sacraments.⁴⁹ Paget in Amsterdam called it 'a kind of excommunicacion to about two parts of the congregacion in former times'.⁵⁰ In a statement that would echo critiques during the 1640s of congregationalists 'unchurching' the parish, Alexander Browne, writing from Rotterdam at the time, complained that the covenant and restricted membership seemed to indicate that 'our Church formerly was noe church'.⁵¹ The 1633 covenant also called on the congregation to 'be contented with meet triall for our fitnes to be members'.⁵² Paget scoffed that 'Mr Peters wanted not to be caled [to the office of pastor] by the vulgar English of Rotterdam but by the Godly'.⁵³ An account of Sidrach Simpson joining the church describes him being required to give a 'profession of his faith, and a confession of his experience of the grace of God wrought in him'.⁵⁴ Trials for membership ensured that the congregation, and therefore all decision-making, was through 'visible saints'.⁵⁵ These new 'members' who put their names to the covenant were also asked to formalize their call to Peter to be their pastor by raising their hands.⁵⁶ This call, offensive to conformist ministers because Peter had already been ordained as a minister in the Church of England,

⁴⁴ This report is transcribed in Sprunger, *Dutch Puritanism*, pp. 170–1.

⁴⁵ On British congregational covenant making, see Nuttall, *Visible Saints*, pp. 75–81; Halcomb, 'Congregational religious practice', pp. 117–20. For covenants among the New England congregational churches, see David A. Weir, *Early New England: A Covenanted Society* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2005), particularly pp. 136–71.

⁴⁶ Sprunger, *Dutch Puritanism*, p. 165; Sprunger, *Ames*, p. 200.

⁴⁷ TNA, SP84/174, fo. 174v; BL, Add. MS 6394, fos 151r–4v. For the identification of John White, see Bremer, *Building a New Jerusalem*, p. 134.

⁴⁸ Sprunger, *Ames*, p. 186.

⁴⁹ BL, Add. MS 6394, fo. 139v, printed in Burrage, II:271. See also TNA, SP16/286, no. 94.

⁵⁰ BL, Add. MS 6394, fo. 139v, printed in Burrage, II:271.

⁵¹ BL, Add. MS 6394, fo. 146r, printed in Burrage, II:273.

⁵² BL, Add. MS 6394, fo. 154r–v, printed in Sprunger, *Dutch Puritanism*, pp. 164–5. A second copy survives in TNA, SP16/252, no. 32.

⁵³ TNA, SP16/286, no. 94.

⁵⁴ Longstaffe, *Memoirs of Ambrose Barnes*, pp. 131–2.

⁵⁵ On the congregational concept of visible saints, see: Nuttall, *Visible Saints*; Edmund Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (New York, 1963).

⁵⁶ TNA, SP16/286, no. 94; BL, Add. MS 6394, fo. 139v.

represented a very different view of ordination: one to the office of pastor rather than the status of cleric, and unlike an ordained minister in the Church of England, Peter's call to the pastorate of Rotterdam validated his ministry to that particular church alone. The congregational pastor required no other sanction than a formal call and installation by their congregation, though in practice most congregational ordinations were overseen by 'neighbouring' ministers. Peter's was overseen by John Forbes, president of the English synod in the Dutch Republic.⁵⁷

Peter left Rotterdam in June 1635, emigrating to New England shortly thereafter, and the next two ministers in the church also sailed for America, leaving the Rotterdam church without a minister by March 1636. In October, Stephen Goffe reported that 'a fresh officer was sent from Norwich to be Peters successor'.⁵⁸ Bishop Wren of Norwich had already received reports in May that John Ward, William Bridge and Thomas Allen, whom he had excommunicated for nonconformity, were at Rotterdam.⁵⁹ Other puritan ministers from his diocese would follow over the coming years, including two other dissenting brethren, Jeremiah Burroughes and William Greenhill, and Bridge's curate Edward Wale.⁶⁰ Bridge and Ward became ministers of the church, possibly soon after their arrival in 1636, renouncing their English ordination, according to one hostile Scottish Presbyterian writing later, and then being reordained. Wale became an 'elder' of the congregation.⁶¹

Around the following year, Bridge wrote his letter from Rotterdam to leading puritan laymen in Norwich, pleading with them 'to come from the Church of England'. Surviving snippets of the letter, published by Edwards in his *Antapologia*, suggest a fully developed congregational polity. According to Edwards, Bridge called on his friends 'Not to be content with the ordinance of hearing, but to looke out after the plat-forme of Government, left by Christ and his Apostles, by Elders, Pastours, Teachers, Deacons and Widdowes, and to consider, that every Church hath the power within it selfe, and is not subject to one Officer, or to another Congregation, but to the whole body, and to that, whereof the member is a part'. Here we find a justification of the scriptural basis of the congregational polity, a list of the officers of the church and a defence of the independence of particular congregations and the power of ordinary members. Implicit in Bridge's statement was a belief that Christ had given the 'keys' of the kingdom to the whole church, not just to officers, and this idea was most powerfully outlined by John Cotton in his *Keys of the Kingdom*, a pamphlet published by the dissenting brethren in 1644.⁶² It was these ideas and practices that so many Norfolk puritans would encounter when they escaped to Rotterdam during the bishopric of Matthew Wren.

The most controversial, and I would argue consequential, moment in these years of the Rotterdam church came in 1639, when the congregation divided over a number of issues. Contemporary reports differ on the nature of the split, though the basic contours seem clear enough. The dissenting brethren, in their *Apologetical Narration*, admitted that the Rotterdam church 'unhappily deposed one of their Ministers'. Its sister church in Arnhem judged the deposition 'too suddaine', 'having proceeded in a matter of so great moment without consulting their sister Churches' and 'too severe'. A 'full and publique hearing before all the Churches of our Nation' was

⁵⁷ Sprunger, *Dutch Puritanism*, p. 164.

⁵⁸ BL, Add. MS 6394, fo. 240r.

⁵⁹ Reynolds, *Godly Reformers*, p. 192 and the citations there.

⁶⁰ Reynolds, *Godly Reformers*, pp. 191–2, 220; Sprunger, *Dutch Puritanism*, pp. 168, 172.

⁶¹ Robert Baillie, *The Dissuasive from the Errours of the Times* (London, 1645), p. 75.

⁶² Edwards, *Antapologia*, pp. 17–8, 45, 114; John Cotton, *The Keyes of the Kingdom* (London, 1644). The inclusion of the office of widows is potentially problematic in Edwards' account here, as it is an office he attempts to scandalize later and it is one that the dissenting brethren do not include in their list of officers: *Apologetical Narration*, p. 8.

called, and 'after there had been for many dayes as judiciary and full a charge, tryall, and deposition of witnesses openly afore all commers of all sorts' was given, the Rotterdam church 'restored their Ministers to his place again'.⁶³ The dissenting brethren used this conference, 'the saddest days of our pilgrimage on earth', as an example of how congregational synods, guided by the apostolic command to 'give no offence neither to Jew nor Gentile, nor the Churches of God' and the threat of neighbouring Christian churches withdrawing the right hand of fellowship, were sufficient for the management of disputes.⁶⁴

Presbyterian commentators provided a more harrowing report. Edwards, giving the fullest account, clarified that the deposed minister was John Ward, Bridge's friend who had fled with him from Norwich. Ward had been disciplined for recycling sermons in Rotterdam that he had previously given in Norwich and for siding with Sidrach Simpson on the issue of prophesying. Simpson and a contingent within the church wanted the people to be able to put questions to the minister after the sermon on Sundays. Bridge suggested that it would be more appropriate to hold prophesying (expounding on scriptures followed by questions) on weekdays. The dispute deepened and Simpson left the church to start his own. Edwards described serious acrimony between Simpson and Bridge, both sending complaint letters back to England. Edwards' language is sensationalist: Simpson had set up 'a Church against a Church under Mr Bridge's nose'; between them grew 'bitternesse, evill speakings, deep censuring, deadly feauds' – the final phrase is a reference to his suggestion that Bridge's wife died as a consequence of the stress caused by the feud.⁶⁵

The dissenting brethren, perhaps as we might expect, never admitted to this level of division. Simpson published a brief defence of himself in 1644, claiming that most of his church was gathered from people never attached to Bridge's church, that the 'very few' who did join from Bridge's church had 'discontinued their communion' there for some time, and that they admitted them only after ten months' delay and approval from Bridge's congregation.⁶⁶ This account, if true, perhaps goes some way to explain why the conference between the Rotterdam and Arnhem churches dealt only with Ward's dismissal, not the split in the congregation, a point that flabbergasted Edwards and his presbyterian colleagues. A Dutch consistory report from 1641 confirmed some of these problems. Their investigation found that Simpson's church had separated from the original Rotterdam congregation 'about two years ago' and that Ward had been deposed 'for two or three years'. Simpson's church separated 'because of certain misunderstandings over prophesying', it claimed, while also adding in an appendix that 'when great discontent arose over the deposing of the minister, the discontented persons withdrew into their church apart'.⁶⁷

As with many other pre-civil war puritan disputes, the Rotterdam divisions filtered through puritan circles in pre-civil war London and then burst into print with the publication of the *Apologeticall Narration*. Thereafter the events got caught up in the destructive religious politics that ripped apart the parliamentary cause during the first civil war. Along with New England practices, the Rotterdam dispute became a contested origin point for the congregational movement, where fractious radicalism and pious reconciliation fed into competing narratives about the inherent nature of congregational independence. The pamphlet debate of the 1640s exposed a range of

⁶³ *Apologeticall Narration*, pp. 16, 20–1.

⁶⁴ *Apologeticall Narration*, p. 17; 1 Corinthians 10:32.

⁶⁵ The principal account is in Edwards, *Antapologia*, pp. 142–5, but see also Alexander Forbes, *An Anatomy of Independency* (1644) and Baillie, *Disuasive*, pp. 75–8.

⁶⁶ Sidrach Simpson, *The Anatomist Anatomis'd* (1644), p. 9.

⁶⁷ Sprunger, *Dutch Puritanism*, pp. 170–1.

practices within the Rotterdam church that otherwise would have remained hidden to posterity.

II

The Long Parliament was elected in 1640 during waves of opposition to the regime of Charles I. News of these events dramatically changed the perspective of English exiles in the Low Countries. At least twenty-eight members of the Rotterdam church decided to return to their homes in Norfolk by 1642. They were ‘not without hope of enjoying freedom’ to further ‘the light they now saw, in their native Countrey by all lawfull meanes’. And, after many unstated ‘letts & impediments’, they secured a dismissal from the Rotterdam church and began the work of incorporating into a church in November 1642.⁶⁸ After two weeks of preparation, Christopher Stygold ‘offered himselfe freely to the worke of the Lord in building a house to his name’ and then moved that John Eyre should join him in the work. These two moved that a third, John Leverington, be added to their number. This process continued until ten men were united in the task. Bridge, who was present with them at the time, then asked the other brethren present whether they were satisfied with the proceedings, which they affirmed. Next, they ‘further moved to the sisters to come in & helpe in the worke’. Nine women were added. Six were wives of founding men. One was the mother of one of the founders.⁶⁹ Six years later they both became founding members of a new church. Keeping with the congregational principles of fellowship and mutual consent, each stage of this process stressed the offering and accepting of membership into the group.⁷⁰

The signing of the covenant, which formally instituted the church, did not take place for another seven months. Where we have evidence, months of fasting, discussions and seeking advice from neighbouring churches preceded most gatherings.⁷¹ Causes of the delay for the returned exiles included waiting for approval from the Rotterdam church, disagreement between the Norwich and Yarmouth brethren about where the church should settle, and hesitation for gathering unless Bridge joined with them.⁷² Although Bridge stated that it had always been his intention to join and be their pastor, his dismissal from Rotterdam did not arrive until April. In June 1643, the ten men who had originally joined in the work of building a church formally constituted themselves under a written covenant. Finally, ‘now being gathered into a Church, they blessed God’.⁷³

Gathering only further complicated existing tensions over where the church should settle. For reasons of safety – the earl of Newcastle had marched south into Lincolnshire, a royalist rising briefly secured King’s Lynn in 1643, and parliament

⁶⁸ NRO, FC19/1, fo. 4r; NRO, FC31/1, fo. 1. For the Rotterdam background, Jewson, ‘English Church at Rotterdam’, pp. 324–37; John Waddington, *Congregational History, 1567–1700: In Relation to Contemporaneous Events, and the Conflict for Freedom, Purity, and Independence* (1874), pp. 342–9.

⁶⁹ Jewson, *Transcripts*, p. 25.

⁷⁰ NRO, FC31/1: 7, 23 Nov. 1642. For the theology and movement towards restricted membership, see Morgan, *Visible Saints*. For the strongest exploration of free consent within congregational practice, see Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties*. Unfortunately, we have little information about the practical role women played in the gathering of churches despite women being common ‘helpers’ in church foundations. See Claire Cross, ‘“He-Goats Before the Flocks”’: a note on the part played by women in the founding of some civil war churches’, in G.J. Cuming and D. Baker (eds), *Popular Belief and Practice* (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 195–202.

⁷¹ Nuttall, *Visible Saints*, pp. 74–5.

⁷² NRO, FC31/1: 27 Feb. 1643.

⁷³ NRO, FC31/1: 28 June 1643; John Browne, *History of Congregationalism and Memorials of the Churches in Norfolk and Suffolk* (1877), p. 211.

established a garrison that year in Yarmouth⁷⁴ – the church met in Yarmouth, which deprived the Norwich members of regular access to Sunday services while also increasing the church's membership from the port town's godly community.⁷⁵ Pleading that the church be moved to the city, where many locals were expressing an interest in joining, the Norwich brethren were outvoted. The resolution to the dispute came in April 1644. With the advice of Bridge and John Philip at Wrentham, the Yarmouth brethren agreed that a second church should be formed in Norwich, 'seeing it would make much for the Honour of Christ, the increase of the Church, & procure a comfortable oppertunitie of Church meetings every Lords day'.⁷⁶ To formalize the request, the Norwich contingent wrote a letter to their brethren asking for a formal dismissal to gather. It was infused with the language of fellowship born out of exile. They directed their letter to their 'Companions in sufferings', as noted above, 'for especially to you is our speech directed though with all tender care & respect, & without the least prejudice to any brother'. In reply, the Yarmouth brethren celebrated their 'many sweete embraces in the way of God' and promised to 'assist & prosper you in that greate & weighty worke you are about' to embark upon.⁷⁷ Although tensions over where the church should settle come through even in the origin narratives each church crafted for their church books, the returned exiles were careful and considered in their work of building churches. Most remarkably, perhaps, are the foundational roles that laymen and women provided in the gathering of these two churches. For all of the emphasis on ministers in the histories of the Rotterdam church and later congregational movement, lay members established and sustained the Norwich and Great Yarmouth churches from their beginning.

From this point on, tensions within the former exiles became less apparent, and the churches worked in tandem throughout the rest of the revolution, overseeing the gathering of new churches in the region and managing points of controversy that emerged within the community. Here again lay members proved as active as their ministers. The importance of the Norwich and Yarmouth churches within the region can be seen in their accounts for the early 1650s. In an intense two-year period from 1652 to 1654, the Norwich church book records advising on or overseeing gatherings in Beccles in Suffolk and Edgefield, Guestwick, North Walsham, Stalham with Ingham, Swanton, Tunstall and Wymondham in Norfolk. The messengers they sent to these gatherings were mostly former lay members of the Rotterdam church.⁷⁸ From 1649, the Yarmouth church advised emerging or existing churches at Beccles, Bury St Edmunds, Cookley, Fressingfield, Heveningham, Oakley, Sandcroft, Syleham, Walpole and Woodbridge in Suffolk and Alby, Edgefield, Happisburgh, Hapton, North Walsham, Stalham with Ingham, Trunch, Tunstead and Wymondham in Norfolk.⁷⁹ None of the other surviving church books for East Anglia contain any comparable set of requests for advice from local groups looking to gather a church.

This oversight provided ample opportunities to discuss church polity and develop relationships. The Norwich church developed a system of sending out two waves

⁷⁴ Danny Buck, 'Presbyterianism, urban politics, and division: the 1645 Great Yarmouth witch-hunt in context', (PhD thesis, University of East Anglia, 2021), p. 58.

⁷⁵ It is not clear where in Yarmouth they met. By the end of the 1640s, the Yarmouth church was meeting in the parish church of St Nicholas and the Norwich church was meeting in the parish church of St George Tombland.

⁷⁶ NRO, FC19/1: April 1644; NRO, FC31/1: 23 Apr. 1644. The Norwich church book is more fulsome in the narrative about this split, spending less time on the joint church's original gathering.

⁷⁷ NRO, FC19/1: 24, 29 May 1644.

⁷⁸ For examples, see NRO, FC19/1: 23 July 1652; 20 Oct. 1652; (entry before) 6 Apr. 1653; 6 June 1653; 21 Sept. 1653. ⁷⁹ NRO, FC31/1: 16 Apr., 15, 18, 22 May, 19, 26 June 1649; 12, 26 Mar., 4 Sept., 15 Nov., 4 Dec. 1650; 14 Jan., 4, 25 Feb., 8, 15 Apr., 25 June, 7 Oct. 1651; 6, 13, 28 Jan., 1 July, 7 Oct. 1652; 29 Mar., 3 May, 28 June, 5, 19 July, 2 Aug. 1653; 30 Jan., 6, 13, 27 Nov. 1655; 1 Jan. 1656.

of messengers to prospective church gatherings: the first consulted and instructed about how and when a church could be gathered; the second observed the gathering and extended the 'right hand of fellowship'.⁸⁰ Not only did this allow them to wield significant influence over the burgeoning movement within the region, but these requests point to the existing reputation of the two churches within the region.

Numerous ministers within the region first experienced congregational practices within the two churches. An attempt to gather a church under the ministry of Wymondham town lecturer John Money fell through in 1646, in part because of fears that if Money appeared in the foundation of the church 'it will be noysed abroad, & so it may be there [sic] assistance for subsistence withdrawne'.⁸¹ Presumably either proposed members were on poor relief or they were worried town officials might terminate Money's salaried position as town lecturer.⁸² He quickly joined the Norwich congregation, where he worshipped until 1652 when the godly of Wymondham finally gathered into church fellowship.⁸³ Ministers who spent time as members of the Yarmouth church before moving into parish livings elsewhere included Peter Cushing (Lessingham, Norfolk), John Green (Tunstead, Norfolk), John Rayner (Rollesby), John Tillinghast (Trunch, Norfolk) and Robert Ottey (Beccles, Suffolk).⁸⁴ Along with Money, Richard Breviter (North Walsham, Norfolk), Thomas Lawson (Denton, Norfolk), Thomas Taylor (Godwick, Norfolk then Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk) and Samuel Alexander (Godwick with Stanfield) all spent time in the Norwich church before moving to their own pastorates.⁸⁵ Alexander, of course, had travelled to Rotterdam with his mother when he was just 16.⁸⁶ All of these ministers gained experience and no doubt enhanced their reputations within the congregational community of East Anglia through their memberships at Norwich and Yarmouth.

Laymen and women also cut their teeth in congregational worship in the two churches before moving to local congregations in the 1650s. Norwich's Richard Drake, who had travelled to Rotterdam, was dismissed with his wife to the North Walsham church soon after it gathered in 1652.⁸⁷ Similarly, John and Anne Google (yes, 'Google', in multiple sources) left the Yarmouth church after a church gathered in Trunch, where they were originally from.⁸⁸ They had presumably commuted to Yarmouth from Trunch occasionally for worship, like Captain John Lawrence had. He lived in Wrampingham, nine miles due west of Norwich, but remained a member of the city's church for about ten years.⁸⁹

We can also see the primacy of the two churches through the various church conferences organized in the region, a trend surely built on their experience of the Rotterdam–Arnhem conference of 1639. The Yarmouth church received long lists of questions about appropriate practices from local puritans looking to gather into fellowship. From the beginning, they encouraged church conferences to resolve uncertainties over of practice and belief. In 1645, responding to questions about administering the Lord's supper in public from the church at Hapton, Norfolk,

⁸⁰ NRO, FC19/1: 14, 23 July, 5 Sept., 20 Oct. 1652; 6 Feb., 6 Apr., 29 June, 4 Sept., 4 Dec. 1653; 28 June, 2 Aug. 1654.

⁸¹ NRO, FC31/1: 6 May 1646.

⁸² David Farr, 'John Money: Wymondham's godly lecturer', *Norfolk Archaeology*, 45 (2007), pp. 205–11.

⁸³ NRO, FC19/1: 20 Nov. 1646; 14 July 1652.

⁸⁴ NRO, FC31/1: 20 May 1645; 13 Dec. 1650; 15 Apr. 1651; 4 Oct. 1655.

⁸⁵ NRO, FC19/1: 4 May 1645; 28 Oct. 1649; 7 July 1650; 6 Feb. 1653.

⁸⁶ Jewson, *Transcripts*, p. 25; Matthews, *Calamy Revised*, pp. 4–5.

⁸⁷ NRO, FC19/1: entry undated, following 20 Oct. 1652; Jewson, *Transcripts*, p. 46.

⁸⁸ NRO, FC31/1: 17 Nov. 1649; 6 Jan. 1652; 30 Nov. 1658. John and Anne Google had baptized a child at Trunch in 1643: NRO, PD 242/1, 15 Jan. 1642/3. Tillinghast left the Yarmouth church for Trunch in 1652 and presumably gathered a church there at some point thereafter.

⁸⁹ On Lawrence, see Halcomb, 'Congregational religious practice', pp. 190–7.

where former Rotterdam elder Edward Wale was minister, the Yarmouth brethren recommended the issue was 'of Publicke concernment, & that therefore the Churches should be advised with'.⁹⁰ The following year they responded with encouragement to a series of six questions from the godly at Wymondham hesitant about their sufficiency to gather, including reminding them that 'there are neighbour Churches whose helpe & advise may be had'.⁹¹ In February 1656, they faced increasing pressure within the region from supporters of a millenarian movement known as the Fifth Monarchy. 'Fifth Monarchists' believed that the execution of Charles I had ended the Fourth Monarchy prophesied in the Book of Daniel and that therefore the fifth and final monarchy of Christ was imminent. Cromwell was forestalling this second coming, they thought, by establishing himself at the head of the Protectorate regime, rather than letting a gathering of saints govern the country. The Norwich church was 'incited by some brethren of Neighbouring Churches to send letters to all the Churches of this County that a meeting might be obtained for the mutual information and strengthening each other concerning the visible reigne of Christ and our duty towards the Governments of the world'.⁹² The letter, praising the fellowship of the saints, suggested it was best to get a sense of the issue through a gathering of churches.⁹³ In a show of force against growing radicalism within the region, the Yarmouth church sent far more messengers to the meeting than any other in the period.⁹⁴

Their leadership aligned with hints that Fifth Monarchy ideas were dividing the congregational community loosely along generational lines, with former exiles showing opposition to a largely younger, more radical generation. Nathaniel Brewster, pastor of the congregational church at Alby, Norfolk, while keeping the government informed on developments, distinguished these Fifth Monarchy activists from 'the more ancient Christians about us' who were 'generally amazed to behold such undertakings among them, that professe the humble way of Christ'.⁹⁵ In the weeks before the conference, he emphasized the shame of the 'more sober and able men ... of these friends, so farre as concerns this case' and hoped the meeting would vindicate the reputations of the churches and distinguish them from their more radical brethren.⁹⁶ The known leaders of the Fifth Monarchy movement among the East Anglian congregationalists were mostly younger ministers: John and Samuel Manning (Walpole and Sibton), Samuel Habergham (Syleham), Samuel Petto (Sandcroft), Thomas Taylor (Bury St Edmunds), Frederick Woodall (Woodbridge) and Benjamin Stoneham (Ipswich) were all educated at Cambridge in the late 1630s and early 1640s. They took up their first ministerial positions during the civil wars and all worked closely together throughout the 1650s.⁹⁷ The 'more ancient' congregational ministers in the area, like Bridge of Great Yarmouth and Thomas Allen of Norwich

⁹⁰ NRO, FC31/1: 12 June 1645.

⁹¹ NRO, FC31/1: 6 May 1645.

⁹² NRO, FC19/1: 29 Feb. 1656. On the Fifth Monarchy movement, see Bernard Capp, *Fifth Monarchy Men: A Study in Seventeenth-Century English Millenarianism* (London, 1972).

⁹³ NRO, FC19/1: 29 Feb. 1656.

⁹⁴ NRO, FC31/1: 4 Mar. 1656.

⁹⁵ Thomas Birch (ed.), *A Collection of State Papers of John Thurloe*, vol. IV (1742), pp. 472–3.

⁹⁶ Birch, *Thurloe*, iv, pp. 581–2.

⁹⁷ John Tillinghast, the most sophisticated expositor of the Fifth Monarchy, was older, taking up his first ministerial position in Sussex in 1636 but he is not known to have gone into exile during the 1630s. After his death in 1655 his *Six Severall Treatises* was published in 1657 by John Manning and Samuel Petto. In 1658, Petto, both Manning brothers and Habergham all helped publish eight more of Tillinghast's sermons from manuscript notes he had left behind under the title *Elijah's Mantle*. Petto and Woodall published together: John Martin, Samuel Petto and Frederick Woodall, *The Preacher Sent: Or, a Vindication of the Liberty of Publick Preaching, by Some Men Not Ordained* (1658). Petto also published an account of bewitching of Thomas Spratchet and Samuel Manning: *A Faithful Narrative of the Wonderful and Extraordinary Fits which Mr. Tho. Spatchet* (1693). See also: Birch, *Thurloe*, iv, pp. 687–8, 698, 727; Capp, *Fifth Monarchy Men*, pp. 111–2.

who had been to Rotterdam and New England, and the prominent laymen and women of their churches, who had all experienced exile before the civil wars, can be found attempting to dampen down millenarian expectation and militant action against the government. (Brewster, though younger, had grown up in New England and was part of the first graduating class of Harvard University.⁹⁸)

III

Through their personnel, conference organization and systems of advisory messengers, the Norwich and Great Yarmouth churches established themselves as the premier congregational churches of the region, directing gatherings and practices and mediating controversies. At the heart of all this influence across this period remained Bridge and the other Rotterdam exiles, who continued to act in positions of leadership as messengers to the East Anglian congregational community. This influence provided ample opportunities for the Norwich and Yarmouth churches to shape the congregational practices that developed in Norfolk and Suffolk. If we look at the constitutional foundation of the local church, the covenant, we find clear evidence of the influence of the dissenting brethren amid a changing culture of covenantal language. The Rotterdam covenant survives in two significantly different copies, one of which may be a revision of Peter's original. That with the clearest provenance is held in the Boswell papers in the British Library, provided to Boswell by Alexander Browne, a disaffected member of the Rotterdam congregation, in November 1633, some five months after Peter instituted his reforms.⁹⁹ In 1644, a second version, purported to be the 'Covenant of the *English Church at Roterdame* (as is reported to us) renewed when Mr *H.P.* was made their Pastour', was published by the presbyterian polemicist William Rathband.¹⁰⁰ Both, in their way, are curious. The two versions are significantly different in language, content and structure, though they do contain enough resonances to confirm they are related. Where the second article of Boswell's copy promises 'To cleave in hart to the truth and pure worship of God and to oppose all wayes of innovation and corruption', for instance, the second article of Rathband's reads 'We resolve to cleave to the true and pure worship of God, opposing to our power all false wayes'. Similarly, article eight of Boswell's copy promises 'To forbear clogging ourselves and harts with earthly cares, which is the bayn of religion'; article six in Rathband reads 'We meane not to over-burthen our hearts with earthly cares, which are the bane of all holy duties, the breach of the Sabbath, and the other Commandements'. Both contain unusual clauses compared to later British congregational covenants. Boswell's copy discusses refraining from excessive 'diet and apparell'; Rathband's copy resolves 'to carry our selves in our severall places of government and obedience with all good conscience'. Later English covenants would not explicitly regulate these sorts of outward-facing personal behaviours.

The covenant written by the returned exiles in 1643 was much shorter than either of the Rotterdam covenants. Only five articles long, their new covenant was confidently framed by a preamble declaring, with accompanying biblical citations, that 'It is manifest out of Gods word; that God was pleased to walk in a way of Covenant with his people'.¹⁰¹ The articles were far more summary than those at Rotterdam, with

⁹⁸ Richard L. Greaves and Robert Zaller (eds), *Biographical Dictionary of British Radicals in the Seventeenth Century*, vol. I (Brighton, 1982), pp. 68–73.

⁹⁹ BL, Add. MS 6394, fo. 154r-v, printed in Sprunger, *Dutch Puritanism*, pp. 164–5. A second contemporary copy survives in TNA, SP16/252, no. 32.

¹⁰⁰ [William Rathband], *A Briefe Narration of Some Church Courses* (1644), pp. 17–18.

¹⁰¹ NRO, FC31/1: 28 June 1643. Biblical citations were Deut. 29:10, 11–13; Isaiah 56:3–6; Acts 5:13–14.

none of the specific details about particular practices or personal, outward-facing behaviour. Rather, they 'avouch[ed] God to be our God' (article one); promised to walk in the 'wayes & ordinances [of God] according to his written word' (article two); opposed sin 'either Publique or Private' or giving offense 'to the Jew or to the Gentile or to the Churches of Christ' (article three); dedicated themselves to mutual watch over one another in godly discipline (article four); and finally promised not to 'confine our selves to the worde of this covenant but shall account it our duty at all times to imbrace any further light or truth that shall be revealed to us out of Gods word' (article five). The first four articles summarized and reordered ideas expressed in far more detail in the Rotterdam covenants. But there was very little shared language.¹⁰²

The final article has no equivalent in either of the Rotterdam covenants, yet it is distinctly linked to the dissenting brethren. The promise to embrace 'further light' revealed by God was one of the three 'principles or rules' that guided the dissenting brethren during their exile in the Low Countries, which they outlined in the *Apologeticall Narration*, just seven months after the returned Norfolk exiles wrote their covenant.¹⁰³ Mocked as their 'principle of mutability' by presbyterians,¹⁰⁴ the 'second Principle we carried along with us in all our resolutions', the brethren claimed, 'was, Not to make our present judgement and practice a binding law unto our selves for the future'. Built off their 'too great an instance of our own frailty in the former way of our conformity' to the Church of England, this rule, published in one of the iconic statements of congregational practice during the 1640s, introduced into congregational practice a flexibility, or at least a warning against rigidity, that could be deployed in moments of tension and disagreement.

The inclusion of this principle in the returning exiles' first covenant also exposes some of the developments of ecclesial thought within the Rotterdam church since Peter's 1633 reforms: a shift away from elaborate prescription towards fundamentals. Thomas Goodwin captured this impulse in a letter, written in late 1639 from Holland, defending church covenants: the covenant was 'no more with us than this, an assent and resolution professed (by them to be admitted by us), with promise to walk in all those ways pertaining to this fellowship, so far as they shall be revealed to them in the gospel'.¹⁰⁵ The 1643 covenant is the clearest example of this influence. The following year when they gathered their own church, the Norwich brethren lightly revised the original covenant but kept its fundamental structure and language.¹⁰⁶ Intriguingly, in October 1645, the church 'took into consideration the distaste the reading of a written Covenant gave unto many' and decided that 'for present' new members could verbally promise 'That they were to declare their free assent, & voluntary agreement to walke in the ways of Christ, with the Church whereof they desired to be members, & to performe all service of love towards them, & each to other, submitting themselves to the order & ordinances of Christ in the Church'.¹⁰⁷ The brevity of this concession seems to have caught on in the region, though it is not possible to show direct influence between the Yarmouth church and other church covenants in the region.

¹⁰² Two phrases in the 1643 covenant can be found in Rathband's copy, though both are common biblical phrases: 'avouch God to be our God' (Deut. 26:17; article 1 in both Rathband and 1643); abstaining from 'all appearance of evill' (1 Thes. 5:22; article 3 in 1643; article 11 in Rathband).

¹⁰³ *Apologeticall Narration*, pp. 10–1.

¹⁰⁴ Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (Chicago, 1992 edn.), pp. 106–7 provides context to congregational 'mutability', including Robert Baillie's complaints.

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, vol. XIX (London, 1861), p. 536. For dating this source, see John Coffey, *John Goodwin and the Puritan Revolution: Religion and Intellectual Change in Seventeenth-Century England* (Woodbridge, 2006), pp. 58–9.

¹⁰⁶ NRO, FC19/1: 10 June 1644.

¹⁰⁷ NRO, FC31/1: 9 Oct. 1645.

The covenant signed in Bury St Edmunds in 1648 expressed mutability, sola scriptura and mutual watchfulness in a few brief lines:

We whose names are here subscribed doe resolve and ingage by the helpe of the spirit ofe god to walke in al the wayes of god so far: forth as he hath revealed ore shall reveall them one to us by <his word>¹⁰⁸ and in all deuteys of Love <& wachfulnes> each to other as become a Church of Christ.¹⁰⁹

In 1650 in nearby Wrentham, Suffolk, John Phillip, a congregational member of the Westminster Assembly along with the dissenting brethren who had spent the late 1630s in New England, reformed his parish into a congregational church. He had overseen the gathering of the Norwich church in 1644 and his 1650 parish reformation began a long explanation of the duties of congregational membership. The Wrentham church covenant, however, was short:

Wee doe agree to give up ourselves unto the Lord in professed subjection to his Gospell and promise by the help of his grace whereupon wee trust to walke together in his holy ordinances & wayes. To watch over one another in love And submitt to the government of Christ in this society.¹¹⁰

The brevity of the East Anglian covenants necessarily emphasized core principles. It also avoided over-precise delineations and hyper-orthodox statements that might invite controversy or division. The first ‘supream rule’ of the dissenting brethren during their time in the Low Countries, represented in all of the covenants above, was the ‘Primitive patterne and example of the churches erected by the Apostles’. Within the Word of God, there was ‘a compleat sufficiency’, they claimed, ‘as to make the man of God perfect, so also to make the Churches of God perfect’.¹¹¹ But this biblicism was tempered by their principle of mutability and their third principle, ‘That in matters of greatest moment and controversie, we stil chose to practice safely’. They practiced that which ‘all the Churches did acknowledge warrantable’.¹¹² Although presbyterians ridiculed the idea that congregational practices, especially the independence of particular churches, were warranted by Europe’s Reformed churches, the three principles of the dissenting brethren projected a pious flexibility aimed at preventing the particularism that had divided the Rotterdam congregation. This impulse, which seems to have been shared in some of the responses to questions from other churches we saw above, appears to have been transferred to other congregationalists in the region.

The exiles’ influence over specific practices is more complicated to trace. Many of the practices developed in the Rotterdam church and found among the East Anglian churches were common to the congregational movement more generally.¹¹³ Where we have evidence, we see that the East Anglian churches kept their own records, built their church around covenants, held trials for membership, allowed male members to vote on church decisions, formalized communal discipline and mutual watch and held advisory synods. No doubt many of these practices were disseminated through the

¹⁰⁸ ‘his word’ replaced an illegible deleted word.

¹⁰⁹ Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds (hereafter SRO Bury), ‘Bury St Edmunds, Whiting Street Congregational Church Book’, FK3 502/1, p. 1 (31 Dec. 1648).

¹¹⁰ Suffolk Record Office, Lowestoft, ‘Wrentham Congregational Church Book, 1649–1971’, 1337/1/1, fo. 8r. For Phillip and his church, see John Browne, *The Congregational Church at Wrentham in Suffolk: Its History and Biographies* (1854), particularly pp. 9–14; Susan Hardman Moore, *Pilgrims: New World Settlers and the Call of Home* (New Haven, CT, 2008), pp. 25, 63–4, 96, 123–4, 128–30.

¹¹¹ *Apologeticall Narration*, p. 9.

¹¹² *Apologeticall Narration*, p. 11.

¹¹³ For a survey of congregational practices, see both Nuttall, *Visible Saints* and Halcomb, ‘Congregational religious practice’.

advisory processes that oversaw church gatherings and the extension of the right hand of fellowship between churches. Printed statements of congregational polity were also probably read, though connecting specific works to particular churches is difficult. Nonetheless, tracing the reception of a few of the more controversial practices found in Rotterdam is illuminating.

For instance, Bridge's influence on the churches of the region was not always determinative. One intriguing development within the Rotterdam church was the office of widow or deaconess. Edwards claimed that the dissenting brethren held widows to be a distinct office of the church, which other European churches did not. He referenced publications from New England authors and quoted Bridge's letter to the Norwich puritans, which implored his former friends 'to looke out after the plat-forme of Government, left by Christ and his Apostles, by Elders, Pastours, Teachers, Deacons and Widdowes'.¹¹⁴ The office was certainly not common among the European Reformed churches.¹¹⁵ What Edwards did not disclose, however, was that English presbyterians within the Westminster assembly were divided on the subject, at first voting to confirm widows as part of the deaconate but then dropping it when a key proof text, Paul's greeting to Phoebe in Romans 16, was voted down. Within those debates, Goodwin, Bridge and Simpson were prominent supporters for the office.¹¹⁶ Bridge successfully secured widows in his Great Yarmouth church, but only in 1650, seven years after their gathering, and only then after personally pushing his congregation to institute a full set of officers. In March that year, the Yarmouth church book recorded that widows were 'an Office very helpful and needfull in the Church, which Mr Bridge did abundantly and clearly prove from 1 Tim: 5 chapt: & Rom: 16 & this also was left unto the Church to be taken into consideration'.¹¹⁷ Two women were finally elected to the office later that June and thereafter the church continued to appoint more throughout the decade.¹¹⁸ No evidence survives for any other church in the region taking up the role throughout the period and in fact there seemed little support for the office within the congregational community throughout the later revolution.¹¹⁹

Bridge was more successful, if still tested, with lay preachers and prophesying. Lay prophesying had been at the centre of his disagreement with Simpson in Rotterdam. There, according to Edwards, Simpson opposed Bridge, arguing for 'prophesying to be exercised in that Church, that the people on the Lords dayes should have liberty after the Sermons ended, to put doubts and questions to the Ministers'. Bridge 'yeilded so farre that the Church should meet on a weeke day, and then they should have that liberty' but this did not satisfy Simpson and others in the congregation.¹²⁰ Despite this apparent hesitancy, the Yarmouth church organized lay prophesying (on weekdays) soon after its gathering, to supplement preaching while Bridge was away in London at the Westminster assembly.¹²¹ Specific lay prophesiers were named in July

¹¹⁴ Edwards, *Antapologia*, pp. 45, 61.

¹¹⁵ Philip Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven, CT, 2002), pp. 88, 445.

¹¹⁶ Chad Van Dixhoorn (ed.), *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly, 1643–1652*, vol. II (Oxford, 2012), p. 12; Chad Van Dixhoorn (ed.), *John Lightfoot's Journals of the Westminster Assembly* (Oxford, 2023), pp. 210, 213–9.

¹¹⁷ NRO, FC31/1: 12 Mar. 1650.

¹¹⁸ NRO, FC31/1: 11 June 1650. Others were elected to the office on: 13 Apr. 1654; 13 Nov. 1655; 25 Feb. 1658.

¹¹⁹ The only other church known to employ widows or deaconesses was the Bristol congregational church: Roger Hayden (ed.), *The Records of a Church of Christ in Bristol, 1640–87* (Bristol, 1974), pp. 50–1, 117. The Savoy Declaration of church order did not list widows among the officers of the church: *A Declaration of the Faith and Order Owned and Practiced by the Congregational Churches in England* (1659), p. 57.

¹²⁰ Edwards, *Antapologia*, pp. 142–3.

¹²¹ NRO, FC31/1: 23 Aug. 1644.

1645, when the church also agreed that every third week ‘the rest of the Brethren should Answer to a Question propounded, & that an other Brother should gather up the sense of what was delivered’.¹²² The exercise proved popular in Yarmouth, for in less than a year the church ‘tooke into consideration whither thursday meetings should bee taken up in the exercise of prophesy or by way of answering to some questions given, because of the great concourse & throng of people’.¹²³ For reasons unstated, this popularity died out later in the decade and by March 1650 Bridge was admonishing his church ‘not to let goe the exercise of prophesey’. The church was ‘in our beauty, when the brethren prophesy according to the proportion of faith’.¹²⁴

Other churches took up the prophesying but the public nature of the practice, which Edwards emphasized throughout his critique, remained a point of tension.¹²⁵ The Norwich church named lay preachers in their church book in 1651 but they may have used lay preaching in the ‘double weekly exercises’ they held during the mid-1640s when they did not have a minister.¹²⁶ Of the eight laymen they approved for preaching, all but one had been in Rotterdam. Their resolution, framed in the negative, suggests that some had been preaching before that point: ‘Resolved upon the question That it is not convenient for any member of the Church to exercise their gifts in a publike way (though but occasionally) without the approbation of the Church first declared’.¹²⁷ Prophesying built up laymen in the practice of preaching and enhanced the celebration of the spirit through the Word preached, but it could also be dangerous if controversial ideas were voiced, especially in a public forum during the contested religious cultures of the revolution. In Beccles, Suffolk, the congregationalists actively publicized their lay prophesying meetings but teaching elders normally summed up and clarified the discussion, in order to manage orthodoxy.¹²⁸

Perhaps the most distinct success of the Norfolk and Suffolk congregational churches was their ability to limit the gathering of separate baptist churches in the region. Despite the prominence of baptist beliefs in the revolution and the visible presence throughout East Anglia of puritans who held a theology of believer’s baptism, no discernable baptist church movement emerged in the two counties, and this stands in contrast to the rest of England.¹²⁹ Adherents to believer’s baptism worshipped within the region’s congregational churches, alongside paedobaptists. The Norwich and Great Yarmouth churches were fundamental to the establishment of the region’s cooperative, tolerant fellowship between paedobaptists and anti-paedobaptists.

There are indications that tolerance of believer’s baptism developed within the Rotterdam church during the 1630s. Hugh Peter’s great friend William Ames may have laid the foundation for this when he differentiated between heresy, such as Catholicism, and errors, such as anabaptists’ opposition to infant baptism.¹³⁰

¹²² NRO, FC31/1: 31 July 1645.

¹²³ NRO, FC31/1: 4 Dec. 1645. Later this seems to have fallen out of favour with the church, as Bridge put forward a motion to sustain the practice on 9 Apr. 1650.

¹²⁴ NRO, FC31/1: 12 and 26 Mar. 1650. Some remained ‘dissatisfied’ in April 1652: NRO, FC31/1: 8 Apr. 1652

¹²⁵ Edwards, *Antapologia*, pp. 60, 90.

¹²⁶ NRO, FC19/1: 31 July 1651; *An Hue-and-Cry After Vox Populi* (1646), p. 11.

¹²⁷ NRO, FC19/1: 31 July 1651.

¹²⁸ Samuel Wilton Rix, *Brief Records of the Independent Church at Beccles, Suffolk* (1837), pp. 134–6.

¹²⁹ Small baptist congregations may have existed in the region but evidence for them is not found among the histories of the baptist movement. The most cited survey of baptist churches during the revolution is the anonymously published ‘Baptist Churches till 1660’, *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society (hereafter TBHS)*, 2 (1910–11), pp. 236–54. This deeply problematic list includes numerous churches that explicitly defined themselves as congregational, not baptist. Bridge’s Great Yarmouth church is listed, for example. On baptists during the revolution see the recent survey by Haykin, ‘Separatists and Baptists’ and the works cited there.

¹³⁰ Hughes, *Gangraena*, p. 92.

Congregational churches consistently took this view during the revolution: visible sainthood was not contingent on members' stance on baptism because baptism was not essential for salvation.¹³¹ Thomas Edwards suggested that the exiled churches at Arnhem and Rotterdam both contained baptist members before their return in 1641, and we know that there were adult baptist believers in the church in the first half of the 1640s.¹³² The dissenting brethren also appeared tolerant of baptist beliefs soon after their return to England. In 1644 they advised Henry Jessey's congregation in London not to excommunicate members who turned to believer's baptism, 'which is only to Obstinate', but 'To count them still of our Church; & pray, & love them' and to agree to converse 'together so farr as their principles permit them'.¹³³

The Norwich and Yarmouth churches gave similar advice in East Anglia. In February 1646, the godly of Pulham approached the Norwich church about extending fellowship when members dissented on baptism.¹³⁴ Three months later, the godly at Wymondham questioned their right to embody as a church when they were divided over the issue. The Yarmouth brethren set the precedent for the practices of the area by recommending to the Wymondham brethren:

we thinke there ought to bee on both sides a full knowledge & experience of one anothers affections & judgements; how farre they can beare in point of practice, least after differences, should be more sad, then Church fellowship comfortable; And then & no otherwise wee could rejoyce in an inbodying.¹³⁵

Similarly, the church at Hapton under Edward Wale questioned whether they should extend fellowship to the Pulham church as it disagreed with infant baptism. The Yarmouth brethren replied that 'it is a business of more publicq consernment & which conserns all the Churches therefore wee are first to advice with all the Churches therein'.¹³⁶

Although we do not have an account of any conference of the Hapton-Pulham affair, tolerance seems to have taken root and a corpus of East Anglian 'mixed communion' churches emerged during the 1650s. By 1653, Jessey noted visiting approximately thirty churches in Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk who had mixed paedo- and anti-paedobaptist congregations.¹³⁷ The Bury church wrote infant baptism into its new covenant and confession of faith in 1656 but also promised 'in such ordinances wherein our judgements are differing to walk peaceably & orderly toward each other in the spirit of meeknes & forbearance'.¹³⁸ Two women signed the confession noting that they were 'not cleare' on infant baptism.¹³⁹ Other ministers and churches may also have been involved in the propagation of tolerance. In 1658, Samuel Slater, lecturer at St Katharine by the Tower, London, wrote to Samuel Petto, pastor of the church at Sandcroft, Suffolk, seeking information about attitudes on infant baptism in the county. Petto related the information but stressed that 'there are members in many, if not most, of the churches hereafter mentioned, who are doubtfull about infant

¹³¹ For a fuller account of baptism within the congregational movement see Halcomb, 'Congregational religious practice', chapter 5.

¹³² Thomas Edwards, *The First and Second Part of Gangraena* (1646), Wing E227, ii, p. 13; Thomas Edwards, *The Third Part of Gangraena* (1646), Thomason E. 368(5), p. 100; Tolmie, *Triumph of the Saints*, pp. 52, 53–4; Sprunger, *Dutch Puritanism*, pp. 174, 231.

¹³³ W.T. Whitley (ed.), 'Debate on Infant Baptism, 1643', *TBHS*, 1/4 (2010), pp. 240–5.

¹³⁴ NRO, FC31/1: 26 Feb. 1646. They say differing in judgments but through the Hapton church we know that they differed on baptism. See below.

¹³⁵ NRO, FC31/1: 6 May 1646.

¹³⁶ NRO, FC31/1: 10 Feb. 1648. Nothing further is recorded about the debate.

¹³⁷ Jessey, *Storehouse of Provision*, pp. 346–7.

¹³⁸ SRO Bury, FK3 502/1, fo. 8r.

¹³⁹ SRO Bury, FK3 502/1, fo. 17r.

baptisme, yet walk comfortably with their pastors & other members, who hold forth in practice what they are dubious about'.¹⁴⁰ Although the solidarity of the East Anglian churches was tested by rigid Baptists during the 1655–6 Fifth Monarchy crisis, the 1658 letter from Slater to Petto (one of the area's leading Fifth Monarchy ministers) implies that the community retained its unity. Given the volatility of the revolution, overcoming divided opinion on baptism represents one of the major achievements of the East Anglian movement and its roots of tolerance stretched back to Rotterdam.

IV

Though at the forefront of state-driven efforts to settle a reformed national church throughout the British revolutions, the dissenting brethren's congregational church polity has long been seen as ill-fitting to a developed Protestant state.¹⁴¹ Congregational independence and democratic power, critics at the time and since have argued, would have created an incoherent structure for a national church, with potentially dangerous and divisive consequences. These were qualities born out of, and best suited to, the exiled puritan communities in the Low Countries and New England. Be that as it may, collective participation in congregational government empowered lay members, both men and women, to take ownership of and develop leadership within their church.¹⁴² Histories of early modern religious movements have too often dwelt on leading ministers who, because of their education and the early modern state's tendency to persecute elite dissidents, tended to leave a clearer mark on the surviving historical record. Ministers were significant, as the record of William Bridge shows: his cultivation of a puritan following in Norwich during the early 1630s, his invitation for Norvicians to join him in Rotterdam and his guidance of East Anglian congregationalists within and beyond his congregation during the revolution all confirm that lay followers gave deference to and took seriously the often explicit inequalities between pastor and congregation. But the story of the emergence of an East Anglian congregational movement cannot be understood without reference to the laymen and women who also fled to Rotterdam in the late 1630s. As Frank Bremer has recently reminded us, laymen and women often drove the puritan movement forward and congregationalism structurally encouraged lay participation more than most puritan groups.¹⁴³ From the 1640s, with Bridge and through their experiences in one of the most experimental English churches in the Dutch Republic, these Norfolk puritan exiles helped direct and sustain the creation and expansion of a new religious denomination in East Anglia.

The experience of exile forged a clear bond among the Norfolk men and women who fled to Rotterdam, one defined by their congregationalism. They understood their exile and their congregationalism providentially: God had 'stirred up' their hearts to return to their former homes 'to further the light (they now saw)'.¹⁴⁴ God had called them to give birth to a movement and from 1643 they set about their work. Their formative religious experiences in Rotterdam attached their minds to a number of beliefs and mindsets that can be traced into the East Anglian congregational movement over the following two decades. The most obvious, and

¹⁴⁰ Francis Peck, *Desiderata Curiosa* (1779), p. 505.

¹⁴¹ Hughes, *Gangraena*, p. 333; Tolmie, *Triumph of the Saints*, p. 93.

¹⁴² Francis J. Bremer, *Lay Empowerment and the Development of Puritanism* (New York, 2015); Michael Davies, Anne Dunan-Page and Joel Halcomb, 'Being a dissenter: lay experience in the gathered churches', in Coffey, *Dissenting Traditions*, pp. 472–94; Claire Cross, *Church and People, 1450–1660: The Triumph of the Laity in the English Church* (London, 1976).

¹⁴³ Bremer, *Lay Empowerment*, pp. 177–8.

¹⁴⁴ NRO, FC19/1, fo. 1r.

regularly discussed by historians, is their congregationalism. Norfolk puritans were transformed into congregationalists by their exposure to the congregational practices within the English Reformed Church in Rotterdam. Their subsequent leadership in Norfolk and the surrounding region was rooted in their common 'sufferings both in our owne & a strange land'. Experience, knowledge and suffering solidified their status and those traits were inseparable from their sojourn to the Low Countries.

But two other, less noticed, aspects of the experience of exile stand out in the analysis above. First, the 1639 conference between the Rotterdam and Arnhem churches probably had a more profound impact on later congregational practices than historians have realized. To date this conference has been discussed as an aspect of the 'grand debate' in print between civil war presbyterians and independents. The potential volatility of congregational independence and the effectiveness, or otherwise, of advisory, non-binding synods were two of the touchstones of the bitter, public fracturing of parliamentary puritanism in the mid-1640s.¹⁴⁵ Whatever the realities of the disputes in Rotterdam in 1639, consideration of the use of congregational synods or inter-church conferences in East Anglia throughout the 1640s and 1650s suggests that congregationalists in the region understood these synods in the way the *Apologeticall Narration* described them: the 'great and usefull an end of *Synods* and *Assemblies*', the dissenting brethren concluded, was to search out the truth and 'tend to union'.

We are so farre from holding up the differences that occur, or making the breaches greater or wider, that we endeavour upon all such occasions to grant and yeeld ... to the utmost latitude of our light and consciences.¹⁴⁶

This emphasis on the practicalities of managing dissent and union within the congregational community, which was theologically expressed but also rooted temperamentally to their reflections on the divisions of 1639, is evident throughout the records of the Norwich and Yarmouth churches. The discussions and uses of church conferences in East Anglia during the revolution are expressed in language referential to the *Apologeticall Narration*. This understanding was shared by the laymen and women who returned to Norfolk from 1642 and, I would argue, shaped the practices of the East Anglian congregational movement for the next twenty years.

Second, the tolerance of believer's baptism within the Rotterdam and Arnhem churches was transferred back to England and became a hallmark of British congregationalism. It was not merely a product of the civil wars, even if the religious politics of the 1640s encouraged pragmatic approaches to maintaining cooperation among parliament's religiously diverse supporters. Throughout Britain and Ireland, no other regional congregational network proved as successful as those in East Anglia in keeping anti-paedobaptist believers within their churches. The lack of a visible baptist church movement in Norfolk and Suffolk during the revolution – two counties famed for their puritanism and exposed to the full range of theological diversity during the revolution – is a strange fact, one that separates them from all others in England. It is explained by the cultures of tolerance developed among local congregational churches, led from the early 1640s by the returned exiles who established the Norwich and Yarmouth churches.

These conclusions suggest that the experience of English religious exile in the Low Countries warrants more consideration. It has now been over forty years since Keith Sprunger's study of the English churches in the Low Countries. Since then, scholars

¹⁴⁵ Powell, *Crisis of British Protestantism* and Vernon, *London Presbyterians* provide the best modern accounts of these debates.

¹⁴⁶ *Apologeticall Narration*, pp. 29–30.

have explored the often-close interactions between Dutch and English Calvinists in Britain and in the Low Countries.¹⁴⁷ The sources used here give little indication of Dutch influence, and yet we know Norfolk's puritans had close connections to local Stranger communities.¹⁴⁸ And, as we have seen, in the English churches abroad, religious practices were teased out and codified in the experimental atmosphere of a religiously diverse and tolerant Dutch Republic. Although we have long known about the practices and tensions that developed among these exile groups, the long-term significance of these experiences can surely help us better understand the transnational and inter-continental nature of post-reformation religious movements.

¹⁴⁷ For example, see Nigel Goose and Liên Luu (eds), *Immigrants in Tudor and Early Stuart England* (Brighton, 2005), particularly David Trim's chapter 'Immigrants, the indigenous community and international Calvinism', pp. 211–27.

¹⁴⁸ Reynolds, *Godly Reformers*, pp. 162–3, 192; Chris King, "'Strangers in a strange land': immigrants and urban culture in early modern Norwich', in Chris King and Duncan Sayer (eds), *The Archaeology of Post-Medieval Religion* (Woodbridge, 2011), pp. 83–105.