

## Ecumenism

### Progressives' Progress

by *Michael Cross*

**I**N 1951 a number of students from Liberal and Reform families established a Progressive Jewish Group with the support and guidance of the Progressive Jewish Chaplaincy. Discussions and services were held from time to time, with occasional visits from a Rabbi. 25 years later, when Pamela and I arrived in Oxford, it was still functioning on an informal basis, meeting every two weeks for a Sabbath Eve service in one of the college rooms, and although they joined their more Orthodox fellows for the evening meal they were not taking advantage of the fact that the Synagogue was available to Jews of any affiliation.

A year or so later, the size of the congregation that came to a service conducted by Rabbi Julia Neuberger encouraged us to find out whether there would be enough support to justify holding services regularly. We were greatly helped - and it was a foretaste of our continuing experience - by David Lewis, the then President of the congregation, who offered to circulate a notice about them with all the other papers that went to the members at *Rosh Hashanah*.

We were surprised at the extent of the response; so together with Alan and Margaret Curtis we embarked on what has since become an institution - regular monthly Liberal services. 'Regular' was at first rather a euphemism; we were without organisation, experience or even Prayer Books! Numbers varied between six and forty, as when we had a visit from a Rabbi and the support of a volunteer choir from London. Gradually difficulties were overcome and we received help from all sorts of directions, most particularly from the Orthodox congregation, who not only ensured that a *Sefer* was available for us, but happily allowed us to use the Synagogue itself when there was an occasion which warranted it. In addition there has been an irregular succession of American Reform Rabbis at Yarnton, who have made time, in spite of their commitments, to conduct our services and even to run a study group for us.

Since our faltering beginnings, we have had a great boost and great

change. The boost was the arrival in 1981 of Jeremy and Gwen Montagu; their experience with the West Central Liberal Synagogue in London meant that our services, previously run on a rather precarious ad-hoc basis, were given stability and consolidation, so that we are now able to offer a Reform as well as a Liberal Service once a month. The change is in the character of the congregation. Our contact with the students is even more tenuous (sadly, because our original motive was to provide services for them) but our 'home-grown' base is expanding and becoming more permanent. There are now several families with children who have made their homes in Oxford and who are becoming the nucleus of a future Progressive congregation. As well as Sabbath services, we have conducted weddings and *Bar-Mitzvah* services, blessed several babies and, alas conducted a few funerals. We have not yet aspired to Holy Day or Festival services, but have managed to provide children's services on those days.

But what has been established, most importantly and perhaps uniquely, is that there is one undivided community in Oxford. This has been in large due to the tolerance and open-mindedness of the congregation from its Presidents and Council to all its members, and to the response of the Progressives to this inclusiveness by welcoming the opportunity to be involved in and to contribute to the Oxford Jewish scene.



*This Ark from the old Synagogue is resited in the lounge of the new Centre and is used for regular Progressive Services. The curtain which adorns it was designed and executed by Gwen Montagu in memory of Pamela Cross. Both families are closely identified with the Progressive movement and together with Alan Curtis are mainly responsible for these Services.*

*Photos by Norman Lipman*

