

# Glasgow Unitarian Church

11 May 2014 Barbara Clifford

**ADDRESS** “Unitarians and humanitarian work”

My theme today is simple enough to say, but hard to live:

As Unitarians we need worship and reflection; community is central; and we need to articulate what makes us who we are;

**BUT if we are not trying to make our world a better and safer place for fellow human beings and other life, then we are not living our religion.**

I chose my basic theme for today before going to the GA at Whittlebury Hall but several things at the GA “spoke” to me about Unitarians and humanitarian work. Our first hymn, *Blue Boat Home* from the American hymnal was a real hit at the meetings with several participants saying they would introduce it to their churches when they returned home. One of the motions, carried overwhelmingly, focused on the work of the Red Cross and was followed by a presentation from one of their staff. Another motion, about global warming, was referred back for study - much as the motion about assisted die-ing was a couple years ago. Rev David Usher's Anniversary Service was an inspiring restatement of our faith that will have many follow-on sermons in the next few months. He defined faith as the way we look at the world and expressed his conviction that focusing on “Freedom, Reason, and Tolerance” was holding us back; and to move to a more modern meaningful statement of Personal Authenticity, Religious Community, and Social Agency will be helpful to many outsiders and many of us to better understand what we are really about. My service today expands on the last of these, Social Agency, using historical examples but also pointing to today's needs but it is also in harmony with his second point, religious community where he pointed out that the worshipping community exists to serve.

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We all know that Unitarians in the USA and UK were active, along with others, in the long struggle against slavery, a great humanitarian cause that has not yet achieved its total abolition, as news stories of slavery in some African countries remind us. The Americans fought a terrible Civil War, related to this struggle, and war itself causes widespread human suffering requiring humanitarian work. One key link between past and present is the Red Cross, founded to alleviate the suffering of war but now, of course, tackling other humanitarian needs as well.

At our recent General Assembly meeting, a presentation was given by workers from the Red Cross. It showed how work was carried out in the recent Philippines disaster where many people were killed, injured and left homeless due to a monster typhoon. Food, water, medicine and shelter had disappeared for a good part of the population. Red Cross staff and volunteers from around the world, including Britain, went to give aid and provisions to the survivors, a huge logistical operation. In addition to the needed supplies and services, it was their very human touch that helped people believe that they were important and not forgotten, that was part of the relief given.

Humanitarian concerns have been a key part of our Unitarian heritage for generations. In the days when it was easier for strong individuals to have a major social impact, we supplied these individuals, motivated to live out their religious values by working to alleviate human suffering, be it from poverty, disasters, illness, or exploitation. As David Usher said, their Faith was their understanding of the needs and the solutions coming together in personal actions, i.e. their values became their life actions.

We have all heard of Florence Nightingale and her work on the

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battlefield and promoting proper nursing and her loose connections with Unitarianism. In Scotland, we might have heard of Dorothea Dix and her campaign for proper care of insane people not just in the USA but in Newfoundland and Britain. This American Unitarian reformer was active not only in improving conditions for the insane but was another battlefield nurse, in fact she was in charge of nursing for Union soldiers for part of the American Civil War and her nurses were known for their even-handed treatment of the wounded on both sides. The American Universalists had their own “Angel of the Battlefield” in the person of Clara Barton, who was also involved in battlefield care during that Civil War.

Clara was born in Boston on Christmas Day, 1821 into a Universalist family. She started school aged 3 and when 9 years old offered to help care for her brother who had been seriously injured in a fall. After nursing him for 2 years, even after the doctors had given up on his case, he made a full recovery. On the order of service you will find Wikipedia quotes about her career - first as a teacher then as a patent clerk then as a leader in organising medical care on various battlefields. Her energy was enormous and her commitment equally impressive. The Red Cross provided her with a wide scope for her humanitarian concerns, not just in the USA but around the world. Even after she resigned as President of the Red Cross, she founded the National First Aid Society, aged 83! Her Faith was her Vision was her life.

It was not just Unitarian or Universalist individuals that did humanitarian work, however. Both the American Unitarians and the Universalists set up Service Committees, now joined into the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, that runs care projects in several countries - including The Philippines. It was the Unitarian Service Committee work in Portugal at the

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start of World War Two, working with refugees, that saw the creation of our international logo, the Flaming Chalice, to identify the workers and equipment. This logo is now used in Unitarian and Universalist communities around the world, quietly stating the importance of service in our worship.

On some of the UU Service Committee projects individuals can volunteer to spend time as part of the teams working to alleviate poverty and disaster. While we in Britain do not have a Service Committee, we do have service projects both short-term and long-term which people support financially. A Clara Barton Fund has been set up for British Unitarians to contribute to the Red Cross Appeals as they arise. Last year, its first year in operation, saw £20,000 collected and passed on. Our Peace Fellowship has annual projects for which it raises funds, as does the Women's League. These projects are more than fundraising - they are attempts to put needs into our awareness of the world, a world full of practical need. Or, as David Usher said, into our Faith. For decades the Women's League has collected funds and issued reports about the work in North East India that carries on after the start given by Rev Margaret Barr, another committed Unitarian humanitarian. Here in Glasgow, our weekly coffee donations are not just opportunities to give loose change to a charity, they are opportunities to increase our awareness of needs and those who work to serve others.

War, disease, natural disasters, poverty - these are not problems of the past. They are problems of today. Just as civil liberties issues have changed as society becomes more complex, our complex world is also throwing up humanitarian concerns that our ancestors didn't face: resource depletion and competition is much greater; war now does not distinguish between civilians and military - in fact, civilians are now routine targets; but perhaps the

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greatest threat to human welfare is another issue brought up at our Annual Meetings: Global Warming. At the Meetings, a motion about global warming was referred back for further study and will be brought up again next year. With any luck, a detailed pack of study materials will be produced for us to inform ourselves with suggestions for action. There is already plenty of advice available for those of us concerned about this issue: -

- a) walk or use public transport more often than a car;
- b) eat locally produced food rather than food that has travelled long distances to get to our plates;
- c) turn down the heating we use at home and wear jumpers when we are cold;
- d) reduce/ reuse/ recycle.

We each have to choose our own issues and judge our best use of our talents and resources, but if our Faith, our vision, does not include acting on our values, our religious community will be unattractive to others and even to our selves.

Amen