

Worship service at Glasgow Unitarian Church 13 April 2014, led by Barry Bell

The importance of vision

The Sunday service which takes place as part of the General Assembly Annual Meetings is taking place today, and will be attended by the small number of our own members who are taking part in the Annual Meetings as delegates of Glasgow Unitarian Church or of the Scottish Unitarian Association.

It seems appropriate therefore to talk a little today about what the General Assembly is, and is not.

Its full title is "The General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches". Unlike, for example, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, this General Assembly has very little authority over our essentially autonomous individual Unitarian churches and fellowships, but does have considerable authority over those who are on the Roll of Unitarian Ministers in our currently still essentially Minister-led religious, spiritual, and value-driven movement.

It also plays a key role in providing resources to, and speaking on behalf of, the Unitarian movement in the U.K.

This lack of authority over the communities which make up the Unitarian movement in the U.K. reflects the focus on the freedom to pursue our own spiritual path which is wonderfully central to our movement.

This same lack of authority may however lie at the root of the movement's all too apparent failure to capitalise on what I believe to be a general shift - towards support for the sort of questioning and open approach we hold so dear - by the 95% of the general population of the U.K. who are finding that they simply can no longer engage with the various dogmatic certainties claimed by traditional religion, and are voting with their feet by not being regular attenders of any church (or mosque, or synagogue).

I look forward to hearing what our delegates have to bring back to us from these meetings, and in particular to hearing what the meetings have to impart in terms of furthering the role our movement and its autonomous religious, spiritual, and value-driven communities can play for this same 95% of the population of the U.K.

What then do I mean by Vision, and why is it important?

“Vision statements” are rife in the business world, with every public limited company and corporation in the world feeling that they need a short summary of their corporate vision, many of which are pretty bland and about as much use as the sort of statements which used to be made by young women taking part in beauty pageants when invited to talk about their aims in life!!

But Vision statements are pretty important when made by religious and spiritual communities. Visions such as “saving people” or “serving God” are very powerful, and the ones which we might espouse - such as “enabling spiritual growth” or “enabling spiritual growth free from dogma” – will be equally powerful.

In my view our movement really struggles from the lack of such powerful and straightforward vision statements, with far too many Unitarians really stuck for answers when asked “What are Unitarians all about?”

“A Sunday club for nice intelligent middle-class people” doesn’t really cut it, but is perhaps uncomfortably close to what some of our communities have become due to lack of a clear vision.

We are of course more than a Sunday club.

Individually the members of our community, driven by their personal faith and beliefs, are all keen to “make a difference”, to help others, to live in “right relationship”, to improve themselves, and to be the best they can be.

Individually we all get something from, and give something to, our valued open spiritual and religious community here. Of course we do, or we would also have voted with our feet and not be gathering here.

It is collectively where we have difficulties, and it is here where a clear shared Vision will be of most help.

I am a self-confessed “evangelical” Unitarian. Like most who “find” Unitarianism, I see something more powerful and relevant to 21st Century knowledge in Unitarianism than I see in traditional religions – although I constantly encounter good and helpful things from within them.

What in particular I see in Unitarianism is an inherently uniting, rather than an inherently divisive, way to enable spiritual growth, the spiritual growth which I see as the true “path to salvation” – the path to a better world through helping all to become more caring through getting better in touch with what I see as their innate spirituality.

I am much more interested in helping myself and others to use our spirituality rather than in the many possible answers to the question of how we come to “be” spiritual.

The importance of vision

I strongly believe that our recent efforts, adding to our previous efforts in Vision Days, Reality Days, and Identity Evenings, are necessary as we continue to seek the Visions and descriptions of who we are and what we offer which will best enable us **in the present day** to help ourselves and others become better human beings.

I see this as a crucial and ongoing process.

I now bring you what I brought to the close of the “strategy day” we held here recently, reminders of what others past and present have envisioned Glasgow Unitarian Church, and Unitarianism more generally, as being. I hope that you will agree that this material is appropriate for inclusion in a Sunday service.

from the preamble to the Constitution of Glasgow Unitarian Church –

“The Glasgow Unitarian Church is a fellowship of men and women who seek together, upon the traditional Unitarian principles of freedom, reason and tolerance, the truth of religion through worship, study and service. No creed is imposed in the fellowship of our Society and individuals are encouraged and helped to find their own faith and discover their own beliefs about God and humankind.

It is thus the privilege and the responsibility of each generation of members to form their own concept of the nature and function of their church, in the light of its name and past tradition, the present needs of the community and their own aspirations and capabilities.”

from a service taken by myself -

“We here are a community of inclusive spirituality - a beloved religious and spiritual community central to which is **shared faith in enabling personal spiritual growth free from the divisiveness inherent in the dogmatic holding of faith** in the absolute truth of only way in which we humans can view of the wonderful mystery which is the cosmos and life within it.

We are a beloved community in which we are both free to respond positively to our human spirituality in our own way and respecting of others’ right to do the same.”

from the introduction to the book “Towards Beloved Community” (c. 2007) by our former Minister, Cathal Courtney –

“If you’re reading this book and worrying about the ever-declining numbers in your church, then my only advice is to attend to your vision, and not to your survival. The success of a vision cannot be gauged by the numbers supporting it. Nor can its failure be measured by the numbers rejecting it. Visions can only be assessed in terms of the quality of love generated in their promotion.

I have been held in the love of Unitarian and Liberal Christian communities for ten years now.”

from the introduction to the book “Growing a Beloved Community” (c. 2004) by Tom Owen-Towle, for 24 years co-Minister of First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Diego.

“Because of Unitarian Universalism’s radical commitment to the personal search for truth and meaning, we sometimes forget that it is much more than an essentially individualistic religion. Our faith, at its fullest, is composed of confessions, matured into covenants and incarnated in communities. The Unitarian Universalist path is more of a communal spiritual journey than a personal exploration of faith.”

And finally, the wonderfully concise signage outside St Marks church, home of
“Unitarians in Edinburgh”

“We support the pursuit of individual spirituality within a community of diverse beliefs”

Barry Bell