

Service in Glasgow Unitarian Church 28 November 2010

Barbara Clifford leading worship

FIRST READING: from *The Unitarian Way* by Rev Phillip Hewett

“Believing is essentially an individual matter. That is why the question of allegedly ‘shared beliefs’ has been such a thorny and divisive one in religious history. Discussions of belief do not come first in any presentation of the Unitarian way because Unitarians find the ties that unite their community at an entirely different level. What they are attempting to do is to combine individual integrity of life and thought with participation in a nurturing community that can work together co-operatively and productively.

“... The Unitarian movement, like any other religious body that persists through any substantial period of time, has its institutional structure, the skeleton that supports the living tissues. Though such structures are maintained at all levels up to and including the international level, there has never been any doubt that the basic unit is the local congregation, in which the group life is such that the members have ample opportunity to know each other at a person-to-person level.

“In the local congregation, each member can participate fully in the process of democratic decision-making. There is seldom complete unanimity, but there is usually a broad consensus which reflects not only the contributions of the current members but also that of those who have preceded them and established an ongoing tradition. A church has been called a community of memory and hope. Shared memories mean that it builds upon the work of the past; shared hopes mean that it works together in the present to build for the future. If Unitarians take love as their bond of union, this expresses itself in a sharing of memories and hopes, experiences and ideas, feelings and values and commitments.”

SECOND READINGS: from *The Unitarian Life – Voices from the Past and Present*

“If, recognizing the interdependence of all life, we strive to build community,

the strength we gather will be our salvation. If you are black and I am white, it will not matter. If you are female and I am male, it will not matter. If you are older and I am younger, it will not matter. If you are progressive and I am conservative, it will not matter. If you are straight and I am gay, it will not matter. If you are Christian and I am Jewish, it will not matter.

“If we join spirits as brothers and sisters, the pain of our aloneness will be lessened, and that does matter. In this spirit, we build community and move toward restoration.”

Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley

“Why belong to any church at all? Can’t I be a ‘Unitarian’ without belonging? Not really. Most of us aren’t resolute or gifted enough to achieve our full potential living as hermits. Good company helps.”

Anonymous

SERMON “A sense of belonging”

I was brought up in a small mining town in South Wales.

Life was different in the 1950s when people were adjusting to life after the War. Families had lost members – both servicemen and civilians – and neighbours were family and friends who understood, and in many cases shared, these losses. Times were hard, with rationing restrictions and lack of money. Neighbours shared food with each other and even small informal loans until the next payday or welfare payment when the loan was repaid, ready for the next need to borrow. I can remember neighbours borrowing cups of sugar or a handful of tea leaves (no tea bags back then) until the next rations were due. In spite of the widespread hardship, though, life had a security to it because of the community bonding. No one in our street was allowed to starve or freeze to death because they had no money.

My father died when I was very young due to a war-related illness and my mother spent years in hospital, so I was brought up mainly by grandparents. People looked out for each other and the street was part of our home – children played marbles, hopscotch, and hide’n seek in the street and

mothers didn't have to worry because neighbours knew everyone who belonged and kept watchful eyes on us. There were few cars about, which meant our modern worry about traffic almost didn't exist. Attendance at a local chapel or church was the norm – this gave us identity, spiritual nourishment, and another area of activities. I went to a local Baptist chapel and the main lesson I learnt was the importance of caring for each other. In our Sunday School we were told the Bible stories of Jesus's good work, such as feeding the hungry and healing the sick, and the story of the Good Samaritan who stopped to help a man who had been beaten and left for dead. These values were strong and meant to transport you through your life. On a Sunday it was a common sight to see a neighbour carrying plated dinners to give to an elderly mother or single brothers in the street. Shortage of money was a huge problem, particularly for widowed women with children, and unemployment was widespread. In spite of the dirty and dangerous nature of their work, miners were a tight-knit community that fought to maintain their jobs. When they lost that battle, the mining towns started to lose their sense of community, even as the pervasive coal dust gave way to green countryside and clean clothes on the clothe-lines.

What I think is most important in our lives is this feeling that we have connections: with families, friends and acquaintances. In my mind having connections with other beings is a means of happiness, belonging and even survival. I call it a sense of belonging – although others sometimes mean the same thing with the word community.

Jean Vanier, in his book, *Community and Growth*, writes about community from the perspective of closed communities of faith, but I think his words are helpful even in a broader context. He writes:

“If community is belonging and openness, it is also loving concern for each person. In other words we could say it is *caring, bonding and mission*. These three elements define it.

“In community people care for each other and not just for the

community in the abstract, as a whole, as an institution or as an ideal way of life. It is *people* that matter; to love and care for the people that are there, just as they are. It is to care for them in such a way that they may grow according to the plan of God and thus give much life. And it is not just caring in a passing way, but in a *permanent* way....

“So many people enter groups in order to develop a certain form of spirituality or to acquire knowledge about the things of God and of humanity. But that is not community; it is a school. It becomes community only when people start truly caring for each other and for each other’s growth.”

There have been several mining disasters in the news the past few weeks: Chile, China, and most recently in New Zealand. Miners were rescued in both Chile and China but it looks like hope is diminishing for the New Zealand miners.

In Chile, when 33 miners were trapped 700 metres under ground for a total of 68 days, it was initially thought there was no hope for them surviving. But due to a shaft being dug where contact could be made after several days, the proof that they were alive and well gave everyone encouragement that rescue, while difficult, could be possible.

Their own sense of belonging helped them to the discipline needed those first frightful days before contact with the surface, but the subsequent regular communication by means of writing letters and phone calls to loved ones on the surface, gave the miners hope and their feelings of isolation were decreased. There were obviously practical things like food and lights to relieve the intense heat and darkness that the miners still had to endure for over two months, but they were given strength and inspiration knowing that their families awaited their return and that the world was praying for a successful rescue. Imagine the despondency if no contacts existed but merely sufficient stores of food being available. What would have helped the

miners fight the fear and psychological distress that pressed on them without these contacts?

Belonging is an inner drive. We join clubs, groups and churches where we meet and make friends. In a religious community we feel the warmth and receive a spiritual uplift through meeting people with a similar faith as ourselves, helping us to form a nurturing community that can work together. I think that usually we get as much spiritual food during our coffee period as we do during our worship, for the expressions of support and love that we can show each other are more personal than sitting side-by-side during prayer. Church business meetings need to deal with practical concerns but they are also times for showing our mutual concerns and commitments. If the business excludes the personal, it is not really adding to the building of church community whatever good it is doing the church building.

According to retired Unitarian minister Rev Phillip Hewett in his book, *The Unitarian Way*, “a church has been called a community of memory and hope. Shared memories means that it builds upon the work of the past, shared hopes mean that it works together in the present to build for the future.”

I have many happy memories of being a member of the Glasgow Unitarian Church: being a leader with the childrens' group, escorting the group to picnics in Kelvingrove and Roukenglen Parks, playing games with them and listening to their stories at Hallowe'en parties. Then we had the Christmas parties when Santa visited us – on one occasion my son, Duncan, who was about five at the time, asked me why Santa was wearing Bob Joiner's shoes. Bob was a dear member of the congregation who loved playing Santa for the youngsters. Unfortunately, our group of children grew up and left and have not been replaced. Another memory that always makes me smile, is the time my dear friend Corinna and I were locked in the church after a social event on a Sunday. We had been tidying up and didn't notice when the last person with a key left, locking the door. This was in the days before mobile phones and the church phone wasn't working, so we had to

open a window and Corinna shouted out to passers by to ring George Paxton's number. Eventually our knight in shining armour arrived and liberated us.

Members of the Glasgow Women's League provided me with friendship and support during dark periods in my life. The League itself is at a low ebb now as we all get older, but I still believe that the power of organised women is a real benefit to congregations in many ways. Meantime, important friendships and support continue.

Turning to the shared hopes that Hewett suggests people share in the present to build for the future, it is obvious from where we all are sitting, that one of the practical ways we are sharing hopes is the extensive building work on the church building. This is a practical matter driven partly by the need to increase rental income but it is also based on our hopes to give Unitarians in Glasgow greater security to carry on in the future. We hope to keep our religion active and relevant in Glasgow for many years to come.

Hewett also sees the church as consisting of four components each in the context of community: the church as worshipping community; as learning and teaching community; as sharing and caring community; and as a socially responsible community that reaches out into the world around it like the yeast in a measure of flour. In other words, the essential features of a church community are worship, education, fellowship and outreach. In each of these areas it is people meeting with people that form the reason for the activity.

Worship is important in the Unitarian Church because it brings people together to share their innermost values and commitments; In our small congregation where we have no minister our worship involves a variety of speakers whose sermons and styles differ. Our church members are fortunate to be afforded with such variety.

Learning and teaching are important in the Unitarian Church because these help to expand our limited understandings; if we stop learning we are

stuck in our own past – if we stop teaching what we've learnt we close ourselves off from others.

Sharing and caring are important in the Unitarian Church as the central way we express how we belong to each other; community becomes very practical when we share and care.

And social responsibility is important in the Unitarian Church because it is the way we go beyond ourselves and do something for those outside our immediate community. Our long-standing connection to the Unitarian Church in Madras, India, is one part of this. The annual Women's League Project and the annual Peace Fellowship Appeal are ways we can do this with other Unitarian congregations.

As Jean Vanier says in *Community and Growth*: "We all belong to the universe, we all receive from it and give to it, we are all parts of a whole. The danger for people today is to forget that and to think that they are the centre – that everyone else is there for them. People must die to this form of destructive egoism and be reborn in love, where they learn to receive from others and to give to them."