

Make Room? Majorities & Minorities among Us

Presented December 5, 1999

1997 Ministerial Search Congregational Survey

	Do Not Believe	Neutral or Don't Know	Believe
An important function of religion is to encourage ethical living .	5	15	326
Religion should draw from values from many different sources, including world religions.	10	14	320
There probably is no one "Truth" with regard to theological matters.	17	17	308
Religion should concern itself with humanity, the world around us, and the human pursuit of meaning and truth since there are no answers to questions of creation, afterlife, the nature of God etc.	25	29	294
Religion should celebrate the sacred circle of life, which instructs us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.	12	53	276
The powers we have traditionally attributed to a god are inherent in the natural world. The natural world evokes our respect and devotion.	16	51	269
Jesus was a great moral teacher.	22	79	242
It is possible for humans to have a vital mystical connection with the Cosmos.	44	123	170
There is a Master Architect who created the universe which is now controlled by natural law.	154	138	48
There is a personal God who responds to prayer and is active in human affairs.	240	59	43
The Judeo-Christian God is the center of my faith.	267	34	36
Jesus is a unique revelation of the divine, the Son of God	269	56	12

REFLECTION - Austin Lewis, Worship Associate

In our Church's Mission Statement, we agree to "celebrate ... life in all its diversity." These same sentiments are echoed in the Vision Statement that we adopted in May of this year. The first paragraph of our Vision Statement ends with these words "to celebrate our differences as joyfully as we savor our commonalities and to live more fully as Unitarian Universalists." Our differences include, of course, more than just our religious differences, but it is our differences in religious belief that we are here to explore today.

Across the country, religious diversity within Unitarian Universalist congregations has been increasing dramatically. An article in the New York Times in December of 1996 documents some of these changes. It describes the UUA "as a small movement long

known as a home for people who would put their faith in reason and social action, rather than in God." The article quotes a professor of sociology at the Hartford Seminary who states that Unitarians had been known as no-nonsense humanists, believers in the human ability to tackle any problem, an approach that she said reflected the "dominant motif" of Western culture since the Enlightenment.

The article then goes on to quote Unitarian clergy members who say that their congregations are increasingly exploring ritual, forms of prayer and meditation, candle lighting, and music drawn from Western, Eastern Asian, American Indian, and other religious sources. For example, the senior minister at All Souls Church in Manhattan comments that "we're beginning to complement the work of the mind with the work of the heart and the work of the soul. I recognize in my own congregation a growing hunger for spirituality."

It is clear that as a denomination, Unitarians now vary a lot, ranging from people who describe themselves as Christian to practitioners of Zen Buddhism, New Age, and Earth-based rituals as well as humanists, agnostics, and atheists. The results of the survey enclosed illustrate that the changes occurring in the denomination at large are reflected in our own congregation. We also range from those who describe themselves as atheists and humanists to those who consider themselves theists and believers in a higher power.

Our religious diversity offers us the potential for a rich and varied religious experience. For example, I have learned much this year about Jewish Holy Days and celebrations and I have enjoyed again both the silence and the joy-filled singing that are part of the Quakers religious practice. However, our religious diversity also carries with it considerable risk of conflict. From the Crusades of the middle-ages century to the Roman Catholic-Protestant "troubles" in Northern Ireland today, differences in religious beliefs have led to some of the greatest conflicts in human history. How are we going to avoid conflict in our congregation, respecting both theist and atheist beliefs and living up to our vision of "celebrating our differences joyfully"?

SERMON - Fritz Hudson, Minister

"Come, come, whoever you are, wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving ... Come, yet again, come." Music is a powerful vehicle of expression, of communication, even, at times. Words set to music, I think, have a special power either to draw you in or to close you out. "We're gonna sit at the welcome table. ... All kinds of people around that table ... Gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days." These words set to music, which we've sung together several times in the past two years, I suppose could even be the genesis of the question we've agreed to consider this day: "Making Room at Our Table - How Can We Accommodate Our Theist Minority and Believers in a Higher Power?" On last summer's "Living Questions" ballot, 35 of us voted to have us address this question on a Sunday this fall. Put in musical terms, I suppose the question might be: Do we, should we, who happily sing "humanity we wonder at", as we did in our opening song this morning (#313 "O What a Piece of Work Are We") really welcome those who more happily exclaim "There must be a God somewhere!" as we did in our sermon song (#30 "Over My Head") at our table? At least 35 among us, it appears, are not sure that we do. If we don't, but should, make room for them at our table, how might we go about it?

We can begin, I think, where this question begins: by acknowledging that at least some kinds of "theists" and "believers in a higher power" are a minority among us. Our confidence in making this assertion arises from the unique self-knowledge we gained in changing ministers between 1996 and 1998. (There are benefits to such changes, but you don't want to do it too often.) As many as 348 of our church members and friends, equivalent to over 90% of our total membership at the time, responded to the spiritual reference questions in the self-survey we took in the course of that change. Looking at the summary of those responses in your bulletin, you'll see that 43 survey responders said they believed in "a personal God who responds to prayer and is active in human affairs." 59 more said they were neutral or didn't know their beliefs on this matter. Counting all who might even be open to such a belief, therefore, there might be only 102 possible theists of this kind among us. On the other hand 240 of us said they don't hold such beliefs. That makes the former a minority.

To those who know almost anything of our church's history, these results would only be expected; they almost grow from the land we rest on. Three-quarters of a century ago, two mid-western Unitarian ministers, John Dietrich of Minneapolis and Curtis Reese of Des Moines, were struck by certain similarities in the development of their preaching. Dietrich was excoriating our culture's dominant faith as a "religion of human weakness" and promoting instead a "religion of human strength." Reese was denouncing what he called "autocratic religion" in favor of "democratic religion." By 1928 these two had gathered others into what they called "The Humanist Fellowship." In 1933, assisted by Raymond Bragg of the Kansas City church, 30 signatories were found to issue what they called the "The Humanist Manifesto," fifteen propositions describing this spiritual orientation. Within a few short years, this "humanism" became recognized as the dominant Unitarian orientation throughout our area. While Arthur Weatherly, our minister of the time, was not a signatory to the Manifesto, his preaching clearly promoted its perspective, as has every minister's here since. Article 6 of the Manifesto flatly proclaimed "We are convinced that the time has passed for ... theism, ..."

With that history, the first response our question this morning might stimulate is another question: Why would we even think about accommodating theists or believers in a higher power here? If we haven't done so for at least sixty-five years, why would we start now? What's changed?

Unitarians in North America have always been organized as an association of autonomous congregations. Where we can find common ground, we share resources for mutual benefit (to provide a clearing house for ministerial settlement, a publishing house for educational curriculum, etc.), but any church's (or group of churches) power over other churches is limited to the power of persuasion. We, therefore, have always expected and accepted significant variances in our spiritual orientations and practices from congregation to congregation. At the same time, almost all Unitarian & Universalist congregations in North America developed from, and retain the pulpit-centered worship form of, what's often called "low-church" Protestant Christianity. With this liturgy, particularly with its lack of prescribed ritual words or common creeds, the congregation's spiritual orientation has been expressed publicly almost solely in, and therefore significantly shaped by, the minister's personal orientation. Over the middle decades of this past century, our inter-church freedom came to be expressed in individual churches taking on various shades of theist or humanist identities. Within each of those congregations, however, the spiritual orientation of almost all members was assumed (and therefore subtly pressured) to be whatever the minister's was, since his or hers was the only one being publicly voiced.

Ever so gradually, however, since the middle of the century, two forces have been eating away at these elements of our identity. The first force, large and cultural, is the increasing

mobility of our members. More and more Unitarians and Universalists, like everyone around us, are moving from town to town, region to region, several times over a lifetime. Experienced U.U.s, who find in these moves that the congregation they're entering expresses a spiritual orientation markedly different from the one they've left, understandably feel tempted to tell their new friends "You know, there are other ways to be U.U.," or even to ask "Do we have to limit ourselves to this way?" The second force, internal to us, is an increasing participatory democratization of our worship. This force first arose in the many post World War II start-up lay congregations, called fellowships, who, when they grew large enough to hire ministers, insisted on retaining some of their voice in expressing of their spiritual orientation. Now, increasingly, long established congregations, seeing the rich variety of worship life among their younger siblings, are making their own demands for "shared ministry."

Up until the 1970s, the congregations which most felt challenged by these exterior and interior forces were probably theistic in orientation, since humanism was the new voice seeking expression in our culture. Since the 1970s, however, as the march of our culture's faith in science as the source of truth and meaning has slowed, it is increasingly the humanistically oriented congregations' turn to feel challenged by new voices. Nancy Ammerman, the sociologist quoted in Austin's New York Times article, says "the directions in which Unitarians seem to be going pose a challenge of centrifugal proportions. You have a movement that has to deal with a lot of internal diversity, and has to build an identity around that. And that's not easy." This morning's question simply announces clearly, for us all to hear, that this is our challenge too, right here in the "Star City", now.

"The only person who likes change is a wet baby." You hear this truism quite frequently in U.U. circles these days. Inertia, we all recognize, is not a legitimate reason to resist diversification. But might there not be legitimate reasons for such resistance? What if theological diversification threatens the very thing we come here for, that we cherish here? Consider this: What do we call this room? Our Auditorium? Our Sanctuary? It's both of course. It's a place to hear something, to hear stimulating words and music. But it is also a place to feel something, in particular, to feel safe. What if we come here precisely to be safe from theism, at least as we've experienced it. What if we come here precisely to celebrate our humanism, to be stimulated to deepen and live out our humanistic orientation to life's meaning? Is that not reason enough to resist making room for this other point of view? I believe I've lived in Lincoln long enough now to observe that literally every other organized religious congregation in our city seems to proclaim some kind of theistic spiritual orientation. So, we might ask, can't theists who come here, even theists who have been U.U.s elsewhere, find a home in one of these other congregations? We are, and have long been, this city's only spiritual sanctuary for non-theistic humanism. Is that not justification enough for remaining so?

I believe, because of our congregational history, and because of our cultural context in this community, we must take these questions very seriously. I believe it is more than understandable that a non-theistic humanist would feel unsafe in the religious world just beyond our walls. I believe that central to our mission as a congregation, as far into the future as I can see, will be holding ourselves out as a sanctuary for non-theistic humanism. Among the several sources all member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association proclaim for our living tradition, posted here on the wall and printed every Sunday on the back of your bulletin, we here are particularly called, I believe, to hold high "humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit." ... And were we still Unitarian Universalists of the 1940s, or of the 1960s, or even of the 1980s, I believe this would fulfill our covenant as members of our association - to proclaim and protect U.U. humanism in our city, while other congregations proclaim and protect U.U. theism in their

cities, near or far. ... But in the 2000s? In the 2000s, try as I might, I just can't see us, in our heart of hearts, finding that this work by itself will completely fulfill our covenant.

For when we, as an association, reformed our covenant in 1985, we didn't just acknowledge "Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love" alongside those "Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason ... and science", continuing to expect that some of our churches would draw mostly on one source and others would draw mostly on the other. After years of self-study and deep consideration, we found we had to acknowledge other heretofore unmentioned sources for our "living tradition."

- "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures"

- "Wisdom from the world's religions"
and then ten years later:

- "Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions"

And in so doing, I believe, we formally recognized possibilities for spiritual orientations, long known in other cultures while dormant in our own, which clearly cross over - in some ways bid to totally obliterate, the hard line we've labored so hard to draw between theism and humanism.

Our association's covenant, now as ever before, proclaims our commitment to affirm and promote, not just the "use of the democratic process within our congregations," but right along with it "the rights of conscience." At the deepest level, I believe this calls us to be ever watchful that the rule of the majority be called upon only to decide things which, to fulfill our mission, we can only do together - and never, never, even subtly, to decide how any one of us should orient our spiritual lives individually. Beyond this, when our revised covenant, in 1985, took on the new commitment to affirm and promote "acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations," I believe we set ourselves a new and higher expectation for our relationship to each others spiritual lives. Through the middle years of this century our watchword value in this relationship was "tolerance" - a distant "live-and-let-live" kind of relationship. This addition, deeply considered I believe, calls us now to close that distance - to interact with one another on a spiritual level. It calls us to pursue with one another the kind of mutual understanding which assures us the safe, warm soil out of which grows the courage to change.

Our entire association is just beginning to grapple with the core question you thirty-five have pressed upon us - the "how" question - how do we accommodate any spiritual orientation minority among us: theist in some churches, like ours, humanist in just as many other churches, plus pagan in almost all our churches now, and Christian or Buddhist in many. We, here in Lincoln, are not far behind any of our sibling congregations in this work.

Up to now, our Association's Education Department has produced one program to help us begin the struggle. Entitled *Creating Safe Congregations: Toward an Ethic of Right Relations*, its introduction includes the following recognition:

"Spiritual growth leads persons back and forth between the faith community and the work outside, between risk and security, being tested and being nurtured. The rhythm of spiritual life is supported best by the sort of safety which is rarely found outside of religious community. ... The fact that we gather in communities of faith suggests ... a need for the safety which allows us to let down defenses which usually stand in the way of self-examination. We can allow ourselves to be vulnerable only when we are reasonably confident that others in our communities will not take advantage of our vulnerability."

To accommodate - not just to "make room for," but to make a home for - any minority among us, I believe, we must begin by creating the safety that will call all of us to let our spiritual defenses down, that will allow all of us to be vulnerable in our spiritual certainties and our spiritual uncertainties, knowing that our vulnerability will open us only to the inquiring question which promises acceptance, never to the judgmental put-down (even one overheard during coffee hour) which foreshadows ostracism.

Those who attended the sermon stockpot last month to help me prepare for this service, and those of you who attended our interim minister Fred Campbell's program Four Faiths two years ago, and others of you, I know, in similar settings, have already entered into our work of accommodation. Any place that we sit with one another, in pairs or small groups, to attempt to explain our own spiritual orientation and to listen to better understand those of others, creates a small "spiritual home" here. Any time one of us stands here before all of us, on Sunday or any other day, and invites others to follow her or his search for sources which will feed growth, and the rest of us receive that offering with appreciation, we make this room even more deeply, both an auditorium and a sanctuary.

Under our covenant, we are called to be a home for humanists, for theists, for pagans, for Christians, for Buddhists, for others ... but we are not called to be, we could not be, a home for every person who is guided by any one of these orientations. Under our covenant, we can only be a home for those, of any spiritual orientation, who want to engage in the "free and responsible search for truth and meaning" - who want to be free to choose and change and choose again their spiritual orientation - to move as their spirit wills, to change even from humanist to theist or theist to humanist and back again - without ever having to change their religious home in that journey. And we can only be a home for those who are willing to pay the price of protecting that freedom - who are willing to be responsible not only for pursuing and living out their own faith, but for understanding, accepting and encouraging others in their pursuit of different faiths, even different faiths which we ourselves have rejected in our own searches. It is this commitment, to undertake this responsibility, which led Professor Ammerman to observe that building our identity as a movement now is "not easy." It is this very responsibility, in fact, which led one of us at our sermon stockpot, to conclude for us all "This, being a Unitarian Universalist, is hard."

How do we accommodate, make a home for, any minority among us? I've barely touched the edge of an answer to this question this morning, I know. In my reaching, though, I have touched starting places for several other sermons which may later help us extend our grasp. I've also seen more clearly how challenges we will all soon face could be seized as opportunities to work out answers together. One such challenge at least some of us will soon undertake will be to shape guidelines for our selection of congregational and choir music. Surely the challenge we are all beginning to face, to decide whether and how we might change our name as an institution, is another such opportunity.

In the midst of these challenges, the authors of Creating Safe Congregations offer us this guidance: "The only safeguard ... is - in the best Unitarian Universalist tradition - wide participation in a full and complex exploration of the many facets of the problem, and collective struggle to create responses that are complex enough to do justice to ourselves and our community."

Our vision statement, here on our wall, I see as our first such wide effort to create such a complex response. Probably only 75 to 100 of us actually participated in its formation, of course. Only over time and through continuous, active, public refinement, could it ever come to speak for all 400 of us. Still, one sentence in it now stands to test, even to tease, on the road ahead - the sentence which envisions that "We will continue to grow beyond tolerance to celebrate and invite theological diversity."

To realize this vision, I suspect we may all first have to come to understand - as any profound exploration of our individual spiritual orientations will inevitably lead us to understand - that there really is no majority spiritual orientation among us - that we are all, really, on paths shared only by minorities among us. If that understanding, when it comes, feels weighty, feels hard, feels even almost impossible to make part of the safety we all need to grow here, perhaps we can be emboldened by what our current U.U.A. President John Buehrens told the New York Times just three years ago: "We (have) never gathered on the basis of a common metaphysics," he said, "but rather as a practical endeavor in spiritual growth and common commitment." Even more, perhaps, we can be emboldened by what the founder of the very first Unitarian church formed on this planet, Ferenz David of Transylvania, said way back in the 16th century: "We agree, not to think alike, but to walk together."