

What? It's Not All About Me? Our Multi-ness of Worship

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The 'official' description is that ours is a '**non-creedal**' faith, of not having a single set of shared beliefs like those in the Apostles' Creed of today's reading. In contrast to most churches, we are free to form our own statements of faith - *Is that what brought you here?* While the term 'non-creedal' is technically true, I see it as somewhat limiting- more on that in a minute.

Occasionally I hear someone describe us as a 'non-denominational' church; I have to let them know that we are a denomination every bit of much as, say, the Southern Baptists; like them, we are actually not a denomination, but an association of free congregations, independent of the state, and we have congregational polity, which means we control our own property and finances. We differ in that the Baptists have to toe the line on policy based in theology: female ministers, same-gender weddings, etc. *We're UU's- if someone did try to dictate to us, would we even listen?*

And we have a rich denominational history- we were active from the early days of the Abolitionist movement, have long championed civil rights on all fronts, and faced down Nixon and the FBI in '72 when Beacon Press published the Pentagon Papers. The American Unitarian Association formed nearly two centuries ago, while we mark 1793 as the gathering of the Universalist Church of America.

We are not a creedal church, but a **covenantal** church- our agreement to a set of principles is what keeps us together, not a particular theology. With our diversity, maintaining cohesion can be difficult, and from time to time we must remind ourselves of our covenant. We also need to consider the differences among the generations, and how we will continue to be together in the decades to come. But I get ahead of myself.

I am grateful to Marjorie Montgomery, minister for ten years at First Jefferson in Ft Worth and past Religious Education consultant for the district; she give a description I found to be much more satisfying: *Ours is a 'multi-creedal faith.'* And we are- each of us brings our own beliefs, our own theology, our own spiritual practices, and our own concept of god, or not.

What does keep us together as we ‘agree to disagree’? I’ll give one word- COVENANT. I’m not talking about a behavioral covenant like what you’ve worked on last fall, but one of beliefs. We renew this agreement in our congregations every week, usually with a version of one of two different affirmations, as well as over coffee after service. *With the addition of donuts, you can have communion.*

The affirmation you say here, by Blake, was written for the 1893 *World Parliament of Religions*, held in Chicago, and was first adopted by our congregation in Evanston. The other is used in more churches; if you’d like to follow along, please get out your bibles and turn to chapter .. *Please open your bibles..* oops- wrong church. #471 in the hymnbook. *Couldn’t resist throwing that in.* For decades, we at First Unitarian in Dallas have said these words each and every Sunday:

Love is the doctrine of our church; the quest of truth is its sacrament and service is its prayer. To dwell together in peace, to seek knowledge in freedom, to serve humanity in fellowship, to the end that all souls shall grow in harmony with the divine- thus do we covenant with each other.

There are umpteen versions, such as: *in harmony with nature*; while we say *in covenant with e/o* and omit the original’s *and with god*. When you visit another church, I strongly suggest you look at the order of service instead of assuming they say the same words as your home congregation. I’ve stumbled more than once.

This separates us from our Christian friends, who are more consistent with the versions of what they recite; they usually have the same words throughout each denomination. I know several folks who came to us because they could no longer mouth the words, could not continue to stand and read the Nicene Creed with ‘I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church, ...’ or could no longer honestly say ‘Our Father, Whom Art in Heaven, ...’ or the like. *Of course, you say these on the weeks I’m not here, right? Don’t you?*

Resistance to a prescribed and group belief is nothing new- we trace our roots back to the year 323, to those who wanted a more inclusive creed at the Council of Nicea, to Jan Hus in Prague and Michael Servetus of Spain, as well as those in the 17th century who did not agree with the Westminster Confession of Faith. They went on to be the **Nonconforming** churches of Scotland and England, some of which are Unitarian. The version here in the Colonies was the

Cambridge Platform, very similar, except that it included the governance structure of the Congregational Church. In 1780, members of King's Chapel in Boston decided to rewrite their Book of Common Prayer, deleting references to the trinity; yes, the first Anglican Church in the US is also our country's oldest unitarian church. And we can't forget the Mayflower Compact, the 1620 document of governance for the new colony in Massachusetts.

Thus we carry on a long tradition of being a covenantal church, of joining together over a set of ideas and principles rather than a belief. And I want to challenge you to develop or refine your own 'elevator speech,' your credo, belief statement, your description of our movement and what keeps us together, your short answer to the question 'what do you believe anyway?' How do **you** respond while traveling from the first to the fourth floor, or waiting in line, or talking with visitors over coffee after service. The first step is discerning how much answer the person actually wants, but that's another sermon.

Keeping any church in good health is a never-ending challenge, but is more difficult without the structure of that common creed. I like to think of our movement as a 'Big Tent' of religion, where we bring a variety of credos to the table, around the core of our historical beliefs in the unity of god and the universality of religion. Today, you may be sitting beside people with whom you share no common theology, but we worship together; we sing, we pray, we discuss and question, as a body.

For example, the subject of god- in this room alone there are surely at least a dozen or two different concepts, from non-existent to a presence throughout nature to a clock-maker that started things turning before sitting back to watch to an all-seeing heavenly father and others I haven't even thought of, and that's ok. We are here together. We may not ask what you believe, and certainly won't tell you what to believe, but we will respect those beliefs just as you must respect those of others.

In my credo I say that there is space in my church for a Muslim person to sit next to a Jew, a Christian, a Buddhist, a Sikh, and a Pagan, all members of the same congregation. If those people come looking for practices specific to their religion, ours may not be a good

fit. But if they see more value in our commonalities than in our differences, they can enrich and enjoy our spiritual community. Our diversity need not divide us.

Does anyone here think we don't have differences? *Oy vey*. The worship service is too formal, or too casual, the music too slow or fast, too old-fashioned, too modern, the sermon too Christian or not Christian enough, and so on. This doesn't happen just in our small churches- in large congregations, you can hear complaints that the minister mentions god all the time, or has forgotten the word; she's too humanist, he's too metaphysical. We need to get beyond that, because **this church is not about you, or me, or any one of us, but about what joins us together, what makes us a body.**

Forrest Church, late minister of All Souls in New York, had a beautiful way to illustrate his Universalist theology, with his 'Cathedral Windows;' he compared the world to a vast cathedral, complex and rich with details, and an immense variety of windows. With a single source of light, those windows gave many interpretations and permutations of that light. He listed five basic principles:

- 1 There is one Power, one Truth, one God, and one Light.
- 2 This Light shines through every window in the cathedral.
- 3 No one can perceive it directly, and the mystery is forever veiled.
- 4 On the cathedral floor and in the eyes of each beholder, refracted and reflected through different windows in differing ways, it plays in patterns that suggest meanings, challenging us to interpret and live by these meanings as best we can.
- 5 Each window illumines Truth (capital T) in a unique way, leading to various truths, (small t) and these in differing measure according to the insight, receptivity, and behavior of the beholder.

If you would like to learn more, I encourage you to get ahold of Church's last book, *Cathedral of the World*. Perhaps an Adult RE program?

Because we do have a diverse collection of beliefs, or set of windows, it is important that we have a variety in our worship. It's like our approach to theology- we don't expect people to agree with just **one** ism, so ***why would we tailor our worship to just one***

perspective? Texoma is not like Boston, with UU's around every corner and a collection of cathedrals; with the Christians at historic King's Chapel, the Humanist Temple at First Church, and Arlington Street Church for the Pagans and Mystics, and so on. The description is outdated, but it shows the variety. When there are at least a thousand members in the Sherman-Denison area, we can divide by preferences of theology or worship- but I'm not altogether sure we want that. We are first Unitarian Universalist, then the other, and together we celebrate, finding joy and meaning in our unity, and in the universality of our daily struggles. *Vive la difference!*

Of course, theology is not our only area of difference- the late Suzanne Meyer gave a keynote years ago at district meeting, entitled *New Wine in New Wineskins*, in which she described three generations of Unitarian Universalists. Many of the *long-timers* joined decades ago in the heyday of the fellowships, and they have been stalwarts of our faith. Born before 1945, they are 'Come-Outers,' having left the churches of their upbringing. Most of them prefer services that are challenging intellectually, in smaller congregations, and don't care for 'god talk' or spirituality, or anything that resembles the formal services they left behind.

Many of this generation revel in the Unitarian tradition of 'debate;' and for some it's beyond discussion, it is a *sport*. I met one of them last year, when he cornered me about something NTAUUS was doing; after his second issue, I realized he was the very embodiment of the adage that arguing with a Unitarian is like wrestling with a pig- after a while, you figure out the pig enjoys it.

Next are the Baby Boomers, many of whom had left their churches of origin early on, and went out into the world to explore and experiment. Let me ask, if you can remember through the haze- is there ANYTHING my generation did not try? Disappointed with the secular world, these people are more likely to be looking for meaning, for celebration of life and spiritual renewal. We grew up during the Vietnam War and Watergate, so are more distrustful of institutions, and want more emphasis on personal fulfillment and growth.

The third is the Baby Busters who were born after 1964, and many of these people grew up unchurched. This is the Gen X group, the oldest of whom now have teenagers of their own, people who grew up in an era of institutions breaking down and going through major changes; they are looking for stability, for a spiritual home where they can grow and develop their whole selves, and tend to prefer more practical sermons about relationships and spiritual growth, with personal stories. They are also more receptive to multi-media worship, with drama and faster-paced music. And that beloved Unitarian debate of the elders? These 'kids' tend to see it not as friendly argument but as fighting, and an obstacle to growth. What is precious to the one group is off-putting to the other.

These younger generations, 'Come-Inners' who had often left their home church early on if they even had one, grew up attending larger and often over-crowded public schools, and are accustomed to being in large groups of people. They are used to a variety of offerings, are more inclined to leave if programs are not of consistent quality, and most are more comfortable with 'god talk.' With these differences, can you see how our growth is more likely to happen in large congregations like Pathways?

We have lost many of the long-timers since 1991, when *Newsweek* magazine declared us the quintessential baby boomer church, but the issues still remain, with groups that have differing experiences, needs, and expectations. We see generational conflict in worship, volunteerism, fundraising, and social justice, and it makes for quite a balancing act.

And governance. We recently held our General Assembly, where there was surely much discussion about the proposed changes for the way we do things. Ask them someone who went, or read about the proposals for officer elections, reducing the size of the UUA board, consolidating districts, and changing GA itself to a smaller biannual event with subsidized delegates. Major changes like this are proposed one year and voted on the next, so next year you have to send them to Charlotte, NC. If we run out of things to say on those topics, there's always the debate on the Peacemaking Statement of Conscience, or moving the following year's GA from Phoenix, AZ, or the Action of Immediate Witness concerning the Gaza Strip.

The governance is part of a larger issue, of who benefits most from GA and the UUA- some would say it is run **by** and **for** the smaller churches, while the organization itself is primarily for the ministers. With divergent needs and resources, it is often the smaller versus the larger congregations, and I would not rule out changes in the future, or, in the coming decades, even a separation. I hope things don't come to that. We are already so small a body, and need each other.

None of these debates will be settled anytime soon. While we work out our differences, let us keep that covenant central and prominent. Remember that love is our doctrine, the quest of truth is our sacrament and service is our prayer, and that we each are responsible for our own creed. As we worship together, may we all bask in the light of those cathedral windows.

To borrow the closing Rev. Church used every week, for every sermon- ***Amen. I love you. May God bless us all.***

Options for closing words:

#537 in the old blue hymnal

*Go your ways, knowing not the answers to all things,
yet seeking always the answer to one more thing than you know.*

*Be searchers with others on the path,
be adventurers in ways untold.*

*Hold the hope of discovery high within you- sharing the hope,
and whatever discovery may come, with others.*

John W. Brigham (adapted)

#510 in the old blue hymnal

*Though our knowledge is incomplete, our truth partial, and our love imperfect,
We believe that new light is ever waiting to break through individual hearts
and minds to enlighten our ways,*

*That there is mutual strength in willing co-operation,
And that the bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom.*

Napoleon Lovely (adapted)