

Ipswich Unitarians

A COMMUNITY OF THE LIBERAL FAITH

Clifford M. Reed, minister

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I don't know what you think about those Christmas letters that people circulate among their friends and relations in late December but some, at least, bring interesting news from people you don't see very often. This last Christmas I received one from a very old friend of mine who, although Canadian, is minister to a Unitarian Universalist congregation in Cleveland, Ohio. He is actually co-minister with his wife, and they have been at the church for ten years. In their Christmas letter they wrote this:

'This fall the church went to two services, which has doubled our capacity to accommodate more people who are interested in what our church has to offer.'

By "two services" they mean two morning services, both of them with attendances in the hundreds rather than the low tens, drawn from a large and growing membership of all ages. This is not an unusual situation in our sister denomination across the Atlantic. I was rather amused by their comment on this situation:

'While it's been a little stressful, we think the benefit to the health and vitality of the church is worth it.'

Well, I must say, that is the sort of stress that I could live with! Indeed, it is the sort of stress that most ministers in this country would give their eye-teeth for! All too often the stresses we face over here have to do with small congregations struggling to maintain regular services – and the buildings to hold them in! Of course, we all know that churches in the United States operate in a totally different social setting from those in Britain. Church-attendance and affiliation are the norm over there, while here it is the exception. Here, people's social and family life often detracts from their church involvement whereas in America it more usually revolves around it. And this goes for people of all denominations, not just ours.

But for our churches in the States another factor often comes into play, and that is their long record of commitment to causes that some other – much larger – denominations have been much slower to take up, or have bitterly opposed. And these are liberal causes to do with human dignity, human equality and human rights; causes to do with race, gender and sexual orientation. I'm not saying, of course, that Unitarian Universalists (as our American co-religionists are known) are alone in supporting these causes, but they are often in the vanguard, unconstrained by the reactionary and fundamentalist influences that exist in some other denominations.

This has meant that people of what might be called liberal principles in social, ethical and religious matters have often gravitated to Unitarian Universalist churches. They have found there an ethos, an atmosphere, and a faith that meets their spiritual needs, that provides an open-minded religious education for their children and that offers them a community where their own principles and beliefs are respected and honoured, not judged and condemned should they deviate from the pre-determined doctrinal norm. And, as my friends wrote,

'We are most proud of the church's commitment to becoming an anti-racist, anti-oppressive, multi-cultural congregation...who strive to practice what we preach.'

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And although their church seeks to apply their faith to the problems and divisions in the society around them, they remain a community of *faith* rather than becoming a narrowly focussed campaigning organisation. As the church website states:

'...we consider membership...as a "covenant" among equals. We are only as strong as the bonds and relationships we create together as religious community.'

Now, although we operate in a very different situation, I think we can find in this statement and in the other aspects of my friends' church in Ohio, a great deal that connects us. We may face different stresses, we may operate in a situation where public attitudes to religion are very different, but we share the belief that a community of the liberal faith - a community that places human need before the dictates of dogma, a community that welcomes people as they are rather than laying down personal and theological conditions - we share the belief that such a community offers to many people a spiritual home they may find it hard to match elsewhere. But, of course, we will only offer it if we *remain* such a community - and 'community' means people!

Churches are about people. It is an old cliché - but no less true for that - that the church is the people and not the building, however hallowed it might be. A church building without people is not really a church at all. It is an empty building and a faded memory. And a church without enough *keen* and *committed* people will lack the critical mass it needs to thrive - or even to survive - which is why *membership* is so important.

People might like to pop into a church occasionally, to look round or have a quiet moment. They may go there to get married or have their baby christened. But they can only do so because of that core community of members who make of it a living and dynamic spiritual centre; who support its services week by week; who do the hard work of maintaining it and who contribute financially to its ministry and upkeep. Without them there will be no church - only a derelict building, a carpet warehouse, a trendy conversion job, or an ancient monument. Without committed, faithful members there is no church, no meeting, or won't be for long!

Together, to use Paul's imagery, the members become 'one body', that dynamic and willing core who find in their shared life a spiritual reward and a source of meaning and purpose. But more than this, they also constitute a spiritual presence in the wider society, what Jesus called, 'salt to the world', leaven in the lump', and a, 'lamp...on the lampstand, where it gives light to everyone...' (Matthew 5: 13, 13: 33, 5: 15).

The church, the Meeting, as we call ourselves, exists - in the persons of its membership - to testify in word and deed to those values, human and divine, that our society and our world so badly need. And as a *liberal* faith community we are subject neither to doctrinaire secularism nor to doctrinaire and intolerant manifestations of religion. At least, I hope so!

The spiritual vitality of a Meeting, a church, such as ours is not about numbers, at least, not entirely so. What matters is faith - which should not be confused with doctrine! Faith is deeper than creeds and is not tied to them. It is something felt as a uniting, loving bond, even when opinions and particular beliefs may differ - as they always will as long as we remain human! A large church in terms of numbers but which lacks this bond will not thrive spiritually. A small community where this bond is strong will be a thriving, even a growing one. It will have a strong sense of purpose and provide a welcome for those in search of a particular kind of spiritual home which they are unlikely to find anywhere else.

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At its heart, of course, will be love, the greatest of God's gifts and perhaps the hardest to define in words, although Paul came closest in his celebrated hymn to love in I Corinthians 13:

Love is patient and kind. Love envies no one, is never boastful, never conceited, never rude; love is never selfish, never quick to take offence. Love keeps no score of wrongs, takes no pleasure in the sins of others, but delights in the truth.' (vv. 4 – 6)

We may rarely live up to this ideal, but we should always hold it before us and be *content* with nothing less.

Paul founded and nurtured many churches in the first century. And we know from his surviving letters that, like churches today, they had their problems, their awkward customers, their fallings-short of high ideals. But we can also get the sense that they were, for the most part, loving communities, such as we try and hope to be. I often find the most moving evidence for this in the greetings he adds to the ends of his letters. Here we get a sense of real people from all walks of life and diverse backgrounds who are members of one body, united by the loving and liberating Spirit bequeathed to them by Jesus.

For example, at the end of his letter to the Colossians (4: 7-17) we are introduced to people who Paul calls, 'my dear friends'. There is Tychicus, 'our dear brother and trustworthy helper.' There is Onesimus who, as we know from elsewhere, was a runaway slave, called by Paul, 'our trustworthy and dear brother.' There are Jewish Christians - Aristarchus, Mark and Jesus Justus: '...they have been a great comfort to me.' There is Epaphrus, 'who prays for you all the time that you may stand fast...' There is Luke, 'the doctor', and Nympha, a woman in whose house a congregation meets. And finally, Paul writes,

'Give Archippus this message: "See that you carry out fully the duty entrusted to you in the Lord's service."'

Archippus, it seems, needed reminding!

And so, I suppose, do we! And that is why, in this membership service, we not only welcome our new members, we also reaffirm our own commitment to this community of the liberal and loving faith.
