

Ipswich Unitarians

FAITH IN THE FUTURE? A DECADE OF DECISIONS

Clifford M. Reed, minister

Ipswich Unitarian Meeting House, 10th January 2010

Although every decade in human history has had its challenges, the one we have just entered does seem to have more than its fair share! And, as a faith community, we will be called upon to respond to them. In worship, discussion, conversation and the written word we and our successors will have to wrestle with the spiritual, ethical and practical implications of a daunting array of issues.

None is more pressing than that of climate change and global warming. I know there are still those who remain unconvinced either that it is happening at all, or, if it is, that human activity has got anything to do with it. This decade may prove the point, one way or the other. I admit I am no scientist, but as an interested layman, I must say that I find the evidence for climate change, and for human activity being a major causal factor of it, overwhelming.

It surprises me how often it is assumed that concern about global warming is somehow ‘new’, a phenomenon – or fad – of the last ten or, at most, twenty years. But let me read you some words by the environmental scientist, Garrett De Bell:

‘...one goal of the environmental movement should be the reduction of total energy use in the highly developed countries by as much as 25% over the next decade. By doing this we will have made a start towards preventing possibly disastrous climatic changes due to CO₂ build-up and the greenhouse effect.’

We have become familiar with this sort of thing just recently, of course, but what is alarming about De Bell’s warning is that he made it forty years ago! And it came complete with a summary of the scientific case to back it up. I read about it in a book* I bought in 1971! We are now nearly thirty years past De Bell’s deadline for ‘making a start’, yet little or nothing has really been done. Events, though, are proceeding as De Bell predicted. With the opportunity for decisive global action having been missed again at Copenhagen in December, our options, not for preventing ‘disastrous changes’ – it’s probably too late for that – but for ameliorating them are narrowing all the time. As we are all touched by this, all of us must decide what we will do to make the new decade more hopeful than it seems to be so far!

As a community of faith we will have to seek healing and restoration for our global environment, recalling the ancient wisdom that we are the stewards of creation, not its ‘masters’. And maybe we should forget all that nonsense about ‘saving the planet’. It is not the planet that is in danger, it is us! The planet will go rolling on for several billion years yet, no doubt with life of some sort on it – but not necessarily us! Our decisions – perhaps in the next ten years – will determine whether planet Earth remains sufficiently fruitful, sufficiently temperate, and sufficiently peaceful for the human species – and many other species too – to flourish and even to survive. And, as Henry David Thoreau once remarked,

‘What is the use of a house if you haven’t got a tolerable planet to put it on.’

Decisions about land use; decisions about water resources and food production; decisions about stabilizing the human population; decisions about conserving fish-stocks and preventing marine pollution; decisions about where people are to live when they are driven from their homes by floods, droughts, rising sea-levels, deforestation, desertification, and the melting of glaciers: all these issues and more will become ever more pressing as the decade advances.

Ipswich Unitarians

Should we despair? By no means, although it will not be an easy ride even if we make the right decisions today and act upon them. It would be nice if the current 'election fever' – such as it is! – was addressing such real issues instead of playing tedious petty politics. Nevertheless, as Sir Alex Ferguson recently remarked – albeit in a rather different context – 'Human beings can always surprise you...'

Of course, all things connect, and all the issues that demand decisions now and over the next decade, and beyond, are linked in some way and at some level. In the realm of science, the rapid advances in genetics will demand all manner of moral and ethical choices. In medicine, the steady postponement of death – even when death is the best option – will make similarly tough demands. The need to find new sources of energy, that don't cause us fresh problems down the line, will also require hard decisions. Can nuclear power be the answer, as some argue, when it carries grave risks of its own? Not least is its linkage, in some countries, with another threat to humanity, the spread of nuclear weapons. They are still with us even though we no longer talk about them very much!

In our national life, the next decade could see far-reaching decisions about whether the United Kingdom survives at all, or just fragments into its component parts – something I would see as a retrograde step. The nature of our society as a democratic, diverse and tolerant whole will be further tested too. Can it survive further population growth, largely fuelled by immigration, as many are now asking? Can we forge a new and truly national identity that is not modelled on the old homogenous cultural and religious model of a past that is long gone? Can we accommodate seventy million people without placing unbearable pressures on our countryside, our towns and cities, our water supplies and our creaking transport networks? How are we to make just and sensible decisions on these matters without pandering to racism, sectarianism, and their kindred bigotries? These are real issues that we will have to face, and which the old political stances will be unable to cope with.

The new decade will demand decisions in the area of faith and religion – so often bedevilled by extremist minorities, fundamentalist and secularist bigots, and a quite appalling level of general ignorance. One pressing issue is whether the Islamic mainstream can rescue their faith and its reputation from those elements which are perverting its true spirit into something cruel, violent, pitiless and full of hate. Can we help by informing ourselves and refusing to buy into the crude and prejudiced stereotypes that we see in the often hostile and irresponsible media? Inter-faith relations – and not just with Muslims – will demand serious and honest engagement in the decade ahead.

In the Christian sphere we may well see far-reaching decisions arising from the growing tensions between 'liberals' and 'conservatives'. Could disputes over homosexuality, and the role and rights of women, lead to a new alignment of churches and denominations? And if a new grouping of liberal Christians were to emerge, might it not prove an attractive option for individuals and congregations in our own ranks who feel that their faith is no longer adequately expressed or respected by our General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches? I think it is possible if, as a denomination, we make some bad decisions in the next few years.

We need to remember and to affirm our roots in a liberal interpretation of the Christian tradition, even though we also include differing – yet related – paths such as a liberal and religious humanism and a spirituality that finds its focus and inspiration in the natural world. And although we have long had a deep appreciation for the insights of other faith traditions, it would be a mistake to suppose that we can somehow encompass them all without violating their spiritual integrity and our own. Our cherished values, the fruit of centuries of liberal faith, may

Ipswich Unitarians

often find common ground with other traditions – but not always! We must beware of forsaking the trust we have inherited, not simply from liberal Unitarian Christianity but also from Rational Dissent.

As we move into a new decade in a world facing tough decisions on so many fronts – more than I could possibly mention today – may our prayer and our resolution be to play our part in the human quest for peace, wholeness and sustainability, trusting always in the One Spirit who guided and strengthened our forbears through so many difficult decades in the past.

*‘The Environmental Handbook: Action Guide for the UK’, ed. John Barr, Ballantine/Friends of the Earth/Pan, 1971