

“ASSOCIATION SUNDAY”

The First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts

The Rev. Ken Sawyer

October 14, 2007

If you are fairly new to the First Parish, first let me bid you welcome. The rest of us hope you are feeling at home in this, our religious community. I would be happy to spend time getting to know you and doing whatever I can to help you find a place here that suits you, and I am only one of many people here who feel the same.

For some of you, being new to First Parish does not mean being new to Unitarian Universalism, but I know that for others of you, it does. Or maybe all you know about being a Unitarian Universalist is that you are one. I should explain, because not everyone knows about beliefnet.com, although I've mentioned it before. It is a website online where you can take the twenty-question quiz, Belief-o-Matic, which will immediately upon completion of the quiz tell you with what faith traditions your beliefs most closely coincide.

One of the twenty-seven possibilities comes out rated 100%, and the numbers fall off from there. For example, when I take the test – which I have about five times over the years – Unitarian Universalism comes in at 100%, and Secular Humanism at 99% -- except that about half the time the order is reversed, as it was this past week when I took it again. Liberal Quaker was in third at 89%, followed by Neo-Pagan at 78. Buddhism was 7th, Taoism 9th. Strangely, Reform Judaism was edged out for 11th by Scientology. Go figure. At least they seem to have corrected whatever it was that many people used to experience, including me, when Mormonism would finish somewhere in the middle; now for me it's down to 21. I have least in common, when it comes to belief, with the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholics, and, last yet again for me, Jehovah's Witnesses.

What happens is, some people take the test and are told their beliefs are Unitarian Universalist – a religion they have never heard of. But you can click on the name and it takes you to a site that tells you a lot about us, and provides a link to a site that can tell you where there's a UU congregation near you. I know for a fact that some of you here arrived by exactly that route.

Okay, you may say then, I'm where I guess I belong; these are people who share many of my views on religious matters, though not all; and they seem perfectly happy that they don't all agree on everything. I like this First Parish place and the people here, the activities, the Sunday school, the worship, the choir. But this Unitarian Universalism – what have I gotten myself into?

There seem to be First Parishes every four miles around here, every one with a beautiful old building. Are they all local franchises of some national church chain, and where's the headquarters, who is in charge?

Well, it doesn't work that way in our tradition, a tradition that dates back to sixteenth-century England. In fact, they would claim then that it dates back to the earliest Christian communities, which they were attempting to emulate. The idea is, congregationalism. I pointed out a few Sundays ago, this congregation was self-created, it came into existence because certain people covenanted to be a religious community, to be a church, entire of itself.

But from the beginning here in Massachusetts it was understood that the church existed in league with the churches in the other towns. Together they made up what was called the Congregational Standing Order, which had its expectations about collaboration and cooperation, spelled out in the Cambridge Platform, adopted by delegates from throughout the colony in 1648, that affirmed concurrent beliefs both in the independence of every congregation and in the need to be in association. For example, every congregation was free to ordain and install its own minister, but the neighboring ministers had a role to play in determining the potential minister's fitness to serve. And when there was a major decision – like whether this congregation should dismiss its second minister in 1702 – ministers and laypeople representing many other congregations convened to advise.

Jump forward a century. The Congregational Standing Order had started to come apart, with liberals in eastern Massachusetts, like most of the members here, far removed from the Calvinism of the founders, and evangelicals in the western part of the state dug in to defend the old doctrines of native depravity, God's vengeful spirit, the election to heaven of only a minority not pre-consigned to eternal punishment, and the like.

In the 1820s, the separation was effected. In place of the old Standing Order, supported by taxation, there was a free-for-all in which Universalists, Baptists, Methodists, Unitarian Congregationalists like us, Trinitarian Congregationalists like our members who withdrew, Adventists, and before long Spiritualists, Catholics, Christian Scientists, Swedenborgians, Jews, and others all competed.

Liberal Christians like the members of this congregation at the time pursued their faith in common hereabouts, and there were attempts to organize to spread the faith, beginning with a church in Baltimore in 1819 – although Unitarians were among the least avid of the many denominations of that religiously feisty era in proselytizing, for better or worse, with Universalists only somewhat more willing to proffer their faith to others.

But around mid-nineteenth-century, Unitarians formed a national organization of congregations. The Universalists had their own national body. In the twentieth century the two denominations began to cooperate in their efforts, being very close in history, theology, practice, and social outlook. In 1961 they merged, creating the UUA, the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. There are now a little over a thousand congregations, almost all in the United States since all but twenty of the Canadian congregations left when they joined the new Canadian Unitarian Council a few years ago. Then we have four churches in Australia. In other countries, Unitarians have their own associations.

The UUA is, I repeat, an association of congregations. The basic unit is not the continental body: it is we, the local congregation, who choose to associate with other congregations on behalf of our own interests and those of Unitarian Universalism and its values.

Why would we choose to do that? Why might we even be enthused to be part of a continental movement and its efforts, enthused enough to be glad to designate a fair share of our annual budget to the operation of the UUA and to contribute individually as best we are able to its life and work?

Being in an association of like-minded churches has quite a few benefits. I say like-minded with a smile, because our congregations differ from each other in all sorts of ways. We are pretty much in the mainstream here, although many UUs would be

surprised at how conventional our services and our building are. There are congregations much more accustomed to using traditional religious language than us, and others totally averse to doing so. Politics and social action play a bigger role in some, and none in others. Etc.

But we share enough across the board that we can team up to do things like produce religious education curricula and hymn books. When it comes time to find a new minister, the UUA is there to make that work. We are able to come together annually for a General Assembly and take stands on issues from our religious perspective, which are then advanced by our UUA Washington Office. The UUA president, now Bill Sinkford, often speaks out on issues on behalf of the Association.

There are people on staff to advise congregations and congregational staff and to offer support in trying times. Some of those staff are at UUA headquarters, which is in Boston, right next door to the State House at 25 Beacon Street. You will sometimes hear the building or the UUA staff referred to simply as Beacon Street or 25.

And some UUA staff are out serving in one of the twenty district offices. We are in the Mass Bay District, geographically the smallest but one of the larger in member societies with fifty-five. Our District Executive, Terasa Cooley, and RE Consultant, Liz Strong, organize great workshops for lay leaders throughout the year, some of which some of our own leaders attend.

Meanwhile, on the continental level, the UUA staff tries to go beyond its usual activities on occasion, and solicits help from the congregations and members to carry out some special effort, like now, a fifty million dollar comprehensive campaign to build up the endowment and to foster growth of a variety of sorts: growth in membership, leadership, diversity, spirit, and witness. It is called “Now is the Time! A Campaign to Grow Our Faith.” It borrows its name from W. E. B. Dubois, who wrote, “Now is the accepted time, not tomorrow, not some more convenient time.... It is today that we fit ourselves for the greater usefulness of tomorrow.”

One part of the effort will be five Association Sundays, one every fall for five years, starting today, when it is hoped that congregations will remember the value of the Association and contribute to some aspect of the campaign to grow our faith. This first year most of the focus will be on growth of membership, with some focus on diversity mixed in.

They are hoping to raise a million dollars today, made the easier because some UUs have volunteered to match every dollar up to half a million. Half of that million will be spent on a national awareness campaign, increasing the chances that people who are looking for the religious home that we have to offer know that we exist, even without Belief-O-Matic.

Back in the 1950s, there was a UU national men’s group, the Laymen’s League, which had a successful advertising campaign – I mean, for our little denomination, a hugely successful ad campaign – that ran in magazines like Harpers and Atlantic Monthly, with the headline, “Are You a Unitarian Without Knowing It?” It mentioned some beliefs you might have – the sort that Belief-o-Matic would discover – with the recommendation that you seek out a local Unitarian church.

The new campaign has already been launched, as in a full-page ad in Time magazine. Local ads are also available for use, with the culminating phrase, “Welcome to Unitarian Universalism.” The effort seeks to draw on the lessons of previous pilot

campaigns in Kansas City and Houston. The goal is to increase people's awareness that there is a religiously vital, historically grounded, spiritually sensitive, and socially engaged movement like our own. As Bill Sinkford says, we "have learned that there are many people out there yearning for what we have to offer, if only we show them where to find us and welcome them with open hearts."

I admit, not everyone thinks a national media campaign is a good or promising idea. There are ministers and others who say that if the goal is growth in our numbers, vitality, and impact, maybe local congregations are better aware of how to do that than the UUA, so money should be flowing out from headquarters rather than in. Being president of the Ministers Association until recently, it became my job to pass this point of view on from our membership to the UUA administration.

Which may have something to do with the fact that in its final form, this year's Association Sunday sets aside one quarter of the total million dollars for grants to congregations to foster growth.

I was also glad to see that the remaining quarter million will go "to provide to the USA's Diversity in Ministry Team with the resources necessary to support ministers of color, Latino/a and Hispanic ministers, and the congregations that call them."

The number of such ministers has grown, and an even larger number are now training for the UU ministry. But our track record is not good at placing these ministers in our churches and in the happiness of the resulting ministries. There are wonderful exceptions, but too often it seems congregations and ministers alike are under-prepared for the challenges they face together.

That is the assessment of President Sinkford, who is himself African-American. When I heard him speak of this earlier this year, the idea he had in mind was to hand-pick a dozen theological school students of color and those who are Latino/a or Hispanic – and select a dozen congregations that will in the foreseeable future be picking a new minister or their first minister or adding a second minister and train everyone in advance of the settlements – and then use the wisdom gained from these experiences to help promote other successful placements of ministers of color, Latino/a and Hispanic ministers in our churches and organizations.

In closing, I hope if you didn't contribute through the collection – or even if you did – you will take one of the envelopes that are on the landing and make a donation, or at least leave with a sense of the value of the larger movement of which we are part. As Bill Sinkford writes, "Dubois' words ...challenge us, as Unitarian Universalists, to ask the question: how can *we* fit ourselves for the greater usefulness of tomorrow? We live in complicated times and ... now, more than ever, our values are needed to help heal our wounded world. If we have the courage to work together, we will strengthen our congregations and amplify our public voice to increase the impact of our faith on the world around us. There will never be a more convenient time...."

"Now is the time to pool our resources to make ourselves known to all those seeking a liberal religious home. Now is the time to grow our congregations stronger and more effective. Let us summon the courage to let the world know who we are and what we stand for...."

"Now is the time to transform our faith to become as strong and influential as we can be.... Let us affirm our common bonds and purposes, because we are better together."