

Unitarian Universalist Views of Church

Edited by Lawrence X. Peers

Introduction

Each of us brings to our understanding of church our own images, hopes, and needs. Our views of church combine experience and aspiration. What the word church means to us may reflect what a particular church community has given to us as well as what we hope our church will become.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are an association of congregations, each called a church, fellowship, or society. In the past, a fellowship or society was usually a congregation without a minister, though that is no longer necessarily the case. Whatever the congregation, church means more than worship, education, activities, and meeting places. There are deeper meanings of church that can only be understood in terms of vision and experience. In these pages, ministers and laypersons share their particular visions and experiences of church. Together they build a multifaceted view of church that gives a broader sense of who we are and whom we hope to become as Unitarian Universalist congregations and as a religious movement.

Perhaps this pamphlet will evoke personal responses to questions such as: What does your church mean to you now? What would you like your church to mean to you and to those your congregation aims to serve? In articulating our responses, we may find new purpose for our individual commitments, and new direction for our lives together.

Rev. Lawrence X. Peers, Editor
Education and Research Director
Unitarian Universalist Association

The Church as Home

My church is my community, the place where I belong. Of course, I'm a member of all sorts of other groups, both formal and informal, but the church is my mental, spiritual, and social home.

When I first came to my church, almost thirty years ago, I felt I had come home. I found something I had been seeking all my life. I even "signed the book" the first day, in the complete certainty that this church was where I belonged.

All my life I have been a social activist, so it was not the church that introduced activism into my life. But finding a spiritual home where others were already working together to make the world better was a blessing.

Looking back, I realize that, although the social message of the church and the emphasis on reason and education are important for me and my children, my reasons for continuing to be active in the church are different than my reasons for joining. I was younger when I joined the church and more optimistic about life and living. The ensuing years in the peace movement drained much of that optimism from me. I had to reach deeper into my soul and discover my spiritual roots—find conviction, resolution, and commitment that could not be shaken by external events.

My church has helped me in that exploration. My present faith has not come easily, but it has been steadily nourished by a warm, caring community and a minister who, each week, lights a chalice of inspiration and love.

Sheilah D. Thompson
North Shore Unitarian Church
West Vancouver, BC

The Church as Meeting House

I envision the Unitarian Universalist church as a sanctuary in the broadest sense, a place to experience healing from the "dis-ease," the lack of ease, that characterizes modern life. The church and its living tradition provide a creative alternative to the powers and principalities, a holy ground where people can disarm and be truly human. I think that the first step in creating such a space is to listen actively to one another and to God.

I conceive of the church as a meeting house, a place where we encounter one another and the stranger. In such a community the members take spiritual, emotional, and social risks as they reach out to one another and to society at large. The Universalist idea that all persons are ultimately reconciled to God suggests to me the radical connection and equality of all humans. In keeping with that divine equality, we are called to be co-creators, with God, of greater equality in this world. When we worship together, we sense the new life of God's reign of love and justice, and we live in the ultimate hope of reconciliation and wholeness.

Rev. Terry Burke
First Church, Unitarian Universalist
Jamaica Plain, MA

The Church as Justice Seeker

The wise council of the radical democratic and radical prophetic traditions lies at the center of the Unitarian Universalist faith. Our Unitarian Universalist social ethicist James Luther Adams once wrote, "Every personal problem is a social problem, and every social problem is a personal problem. Personal and social transformation cannot be separated; they are integral parts of the whole. I believe every personal and social problem is also a global problem."

Many people experience existential trauma. Our personal issues are family system issues; community and societal issues; local, national, and global issues. Our congregants' lives interface with health, education, welfare, criminal justice, and economic systems, both within the church and certainly beyond its walls. We are, after all, part of all that we have encountered, part of the interdependent web of existence.

May we, as Unitarian Universalists, respond to the troubles of the world, strangers, neighbors, and ourselves in the spirit and tradition of people like Harriett Tubman and Francis Ellen Watkins Harper, Malcolm X and Martin King, Jane Addams and Susan B. Anthony, James Reeb and Jenkin Lloyd Jones, Tillie Blackbear and Russell Means, Rabbi Einhorn, Caesar Chavez, Grace Boggs, and Ronald Takaki. They and countless other women and men sacrificed and cared enough to transmit values that underpin the struggle for dignity, decency, equity, sustainability, freedom, and justice for all.

Oh, the wisdom, joy, and grace we shall receive.

Rev. Dr. Michelle Bentley
Third Unitarian Church
Chicago, IL

The Church as Nurturer

I realize, now, that Sunday school wasn't just a place to get free glitter and construction paper to make Christmas cards for Grandma and Grandpa. While I was there-I won't deny it-the most important things to me seemed to be the Easter egg hunt and making cookies at the church fair. But when life began to throw some fast curve balls, I realized the true nature of what it means to belong to a Unitarian Universalist church.

As a child, I was aware of the unconditional nurture surrounding me, the endless exchange of support and the deliberate gestures made by the congregation to see that we all felt like important individuals, real people. Never, not once, have I felt out of place here, no matter how different I thought I was from peers and adults. There have always been genuine, smiling faces here.

I know what it means to be loved, cared for, and accepted, no matter who I am. It is this beautiful, warm feeling of love and understanding that has remained with me ever since my first years in the Sunday school nursery. I treasure it.

Mary Taylor
Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading, MA

THE CHURCH AS PEOPLE

A church is people. It is not a body of belief, a set of principles, or an impressive structure of stone, wood, and glass. A church has roots in the past no matter how recently the congregation was organized. A church represents a long procession of people willing

to work with others toward shared goals, worship with others of similar belief, and hold in honor the wise and courageous people who have gone before them.

The people who constitute a church come with their needs as well as their gifts. To the extent that they can share their concerns and vulnerabilities and become sensitive to those of others, they will be part of a beloved community.

A church consists of people who are not too sure they are right, who are willing to be somewhat uncomfortable in order to correct what they see as wrong. It is made up of people who order their priorities and choose their way with a generous spirit (and often considerable rhetoric).

In a church there are those who are practical about institutional needs as well as the needs of the human family. There are people who understand our interdependent web of existence, those who can share the poetry they find in the stars, and those who can circulate a petition to save the wetlands.

There are those who can speak out against nuclear madness and those who can remember that the roof needs mending. Churches need people who can help feed the hungry of the world and people who can help feed the hunger deep within the souls of those gathered.

A church is composed of people who continue in the long procession knowing that others will follow-others for whom they must make a better world, to whom they owe a heritage of carefully examined discoveries and challenging possibilities. A church is made up of people eager to be part of that procession yet fiercely aware of their individual identities within it and alert to the fragility of the relationship.

A church is a granite base and a silken web, a crystal ball and a cup of fire.

Rev. Janet H. Bowering
Retired Minister
Haverhill, MA

THE CHURCH AS HAVEN

In our congregation, what members value most is our promotion of liberal religious thought in our community. We affirm tolerance and pluralism at a time when so many are narrowing their boundaries.

Our members treasure the personal support, friendship, and caring they find in our congregation. Many say our church is the only place to find like-minded people with whom to exchange ideas. Our members highly value the Unitarian Universalist approach to helping children and adults develop their own personal philosophy and values.

Many find in our congregation an island of calm, a place for peace and aesthetic pleasure. We meld our talents and our inspiration to create such a haven for one another.

My congregation is all of these to me. Just knowing it's there gives me confidence that the world can be generous and loving.

Carl von Baeyer
Unitarian Congregation of Saskatoon, Sask.

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