

100 Years: Unitarians in Vancouver

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“A true community is essentially a product of a time process. A community has a past and will have a future. Its...history, real or ideal, is part of its very essence...Common memory and common hope... when enlivened by love...mould the consciousness of the present, and...link each member to the community by ideal ties which belong to the moment as well as the stream of past and future life.” Josiah Royce, 1914

In the words of the opening hymn of today’s service “here we are gathered, gathered side-by-side...we of all ages, women, children men...called to celebrate.” And today we begin a year-long celebration of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Unitarian Church of Vancouver—its founding and, more important, throughout this year, I want us to think about and celebrate the remarkable vision, faith, and persistent, dedicated service of hundreds upon hundreds of members of this congregation who built up and sustained this church community; who sustained it through an amazing century of challenges, hopes, disappointments, sacrifice, service and achievement. Indeed, that’s what I think this centenary is all about: it’s about you, us, and those who preceded us—members of the Unitarian Church of Vancouver who strived to make concrete and real their commitment to a vision of establishing a thriving alternative liberal religious community in this city and who sought to extend its caring vision well beyond these doors.

I am talking about women, children and men, who volunteered their time, talents, and money to construct buildings for meeting and worshipping; who taught progressive, vital religious and ethical curricula; who agitated for social justice and peace; who reached out a hand to refugees, draft resisters, and to those in Europe, Asia, Africa, the US, Latin America devastated by effects of war, racial injustice and poverty; and who, when they turned closer to home, paid loving attention to the deep, abiding needs of serving, rejoicing and consoling each other in times of birth, sickness and death. This centenary is all about a “true community” with a past and future, linked to and with each other in memory, hope and love.

For the first fifty years, in the words of Michael Welton, our story is about “a little church that could.” Imagine: for nearly fifty years, membership in the Unitarian Church of Vancouver rarely exceeded forty members; the church was precariously dependent on subsidies from Unitarian headquarters in London and Boston, and an alarmingly transient cohort of ministers. Speaking of the latter challenge, listen to this lament from the Annual Report of 1922: “One minister, then another, all go the same way, and what gains have we made?” Indeed, in looking through the records of those early decades, this congregation often survived *in spite*, not because of adequate resources and ministry. The fact is, though rhetorically British and American Unitarians wanted a strong, vibrant presence on the west coast, the Vancouver congregation was perceived as a remote

outpost on the edge of the world, and as a result it was chronically underfunded and supported by Unitarian centres in Massachusetts and Britain.

What's striking to me is the commitment and resilience of those lay women and men who joined a fledgling, struggling congregation, and in spite of challenges, persisted in keeping it alive. One description of that early group noted that it "includes people of the most diverse theological beliefs. We have theists, agnostics, [and] spiritualists... all bound together by the spirit of the movement—the spirit of freedom and progress." A perhaps less flattering depiction of our members in 1911 reads like this: "There are more men than women. There is no wealth among them, and small social prestige. There is the usual proportion of cranks, theosophists, single taxers, long-haired men and short-haired women, but most seem sensible and reasonable [people]." The Annual Report of 1909-10 captured something of the spirit of that pioneering group in these words: "In a city that has drawn to it so intelligent, varied and progressive a citizenship, it would be only natural and logical to expect to find some common meeting place of those of the faith; a pulpit open to all for the advancement of liberalism and of any... belief dedicated to the advancement and uplifting of mankind."

Here in the very first years of our congregation are laid down many of the principal themes, challenges, sentiments, and strengths to be found woven through the whole story of our congregation. Notice that from the beginning, Unitarians in Vancouver have been extraordinarily *diverse in membership and theological beliefs*. Diversity, and the freedom to express it in myriad ways, has been a hallmark of our congregation throughout its history. That pluralism was present at our founding and is evident among us to the present. It's a kind of pluralism capacious, celebratory and generous enough to include the age-long sensibilities among Unitarians that swings back and forth and dives in and out of rational and romantic tendencies that we harbour as individuals and as communities.

Let me give you an example: in 1966, roughly half way into our journey together as a congregation, a sophisticated, wide ranging survey was taken that gives a good snapshot of the enduring characteristic of our theological and social diversity. Survey results showed that our membership was comprised overwhelmingly of those who joined the church as adults; one third of us claimed no previous religious affiliation; nearly forty percent had come from liberal Protestant backgrounds; the rest had migrated to our doors from Anglican, Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Jewish traditions.

Expressions of belief were also strikingly diverse. For example, when asked about personal theology and belief or understanding about God, survey responses covered the whole spectrum from small percentages indicating militant atheism to traditional supernaturalism. Slightly less than a ¼ of us said that "God" may be real and the ground of all being, but beyond adequate description; almost half said that a god concept was the name for natural, evolutionary forces in the universe which create and uphold love and life. While the remaining 24% said that the concept was largely irrelevant, and that instead, the central focus of religion should be on human values and ethical action.

When asked what propelled them to seek out and join this congregation, 80% of those surveyed claimed that it was because what they found here affirmed an already existing set of values they had grown to hold dear, values which set them out on the path as

spiritual and intellectual seekers: principal among them was a commitment to intellectual stimulation, personal reflection and growth, and fellowship. UCV minister JB Tonkin, writing forty years before the 1966 survey expressed this restless, questing value. “I want to emphasize the fact of exploration more than any of the lands we have already discovered and occupied. I feel that the search for ‘truth’ is a bigger thing even than what we call ‘the truth’ itself. My aim will be to try and find out if there is a place in the world of today for a church where loyalty to the search for truth” will be paramount.

In a landscape of social and political conservatism that dominated Canadian life for much of the twentieth century, that commitment, that openness for the search for truth was a distinctive contribution this congregation provided the residents of this city. One example: before the advent of university and college sponsored Continuing Education programmes and civic community centres, our congregation, for years, sponsored a Sunday afternoon “Free Forum” that addressed a wide range of political, social and cultural concerns that attracted capacity crowds. The Unitarian Church became a magnet for those who wanted free wheeling, well-informed discussions on topics that ranged from Reincarnation to Use of the Bible in Public Schools, socialization of health services, bankers and credit, birth control, Asiatic labour in BC, disarmament, married women in the work force and “Is Science Destroying Religion?”, to name only a few of the scores of Free Forum lectures and discussions. That kind of diversity in programming continued into the 60s and beyond. For example, in May 1967, Wanda Justice, then chair of the program council, reported the success of six worship services, and lectures on Jungian analysis, a seminar on sensible provisions for death, a panel discussion on LSD—the pros and cons, films on Vietnam and the human encounter movement, as well as a public lecture by Alan Watts, renowned in that decade for his advocacy of Eastern Spirituality and practice.

I have been talking about the diversity within our congregation and its commitment to the search for truth, not the dogmatic possession of it. What’s important to note here is that diversity of belief within religious communities usually exerts terrific centrifugal force propelling people away from the centre and from fellowship. By contrast, a distinctive value of this congregation, again from the very beginning, is our commitment to accept and encourage each other in our intellectual and spiritual growth. That value, expressed in word and deed, has served to bind us together in a remarkably resilient fellowship, and created a safe place for our on-going search of meaning and truth to flourish.

Diversity, acceptance, a safe haven for exploration, the expression of these perennial values in our congregation persisted in the face of the daunting challenges of two world wars, economic depressions, chronically low church membership until the tide turned in the 1950s, and a transient professional ministry. Indeed, until Phillip Hewett’s tenure beginning in 1956, I couldn’t find one minister who served this congregation for more than four years; some lasted only for months. This isn’t surprising when we consider on the one hand that we had ministers like E. Howard Durnin in 1918 who no longer believed in worship or prayer at all, and was dismissed by the congregation, and Alfred Hodgkins to whom the Board of Trustees directed a formal request in 1946 that he “consider drawing some of his readings used in worship services from sources other than the Bible.”

Too few members and inadequate support from Unitarian headquarters also fueled rapid ministerial turnover. Vancouver just couldn't provide a living wage for professional ministers. We only attained that kind of critical mass during the boom years for organized religion that took place throughout the US and Canada from the early 1950s to about 1970, when church membership here rose from 100 in 1951 to 400 ten years later. As well, by then, we'd grown out of the building on 10th and Granville, had close to four hundred children enrolled in RE classes (it was not called the baby boom for nothing). Soon, we had moved to our present site on 49th and Oak where, in 1968, we reached the height of our numerical strength and posted surplus annual budgets.

Before that brief hey day, where after we began to mature, age and decline somewhat in church membership, before and since those fleeting golden years, finding the means to really and deeply fund and staff our programs and vision has been a struggle. That is the weakness and strength of our local form of church governance and self-financing; as well it reflects the on-going tension inherent in our movement between promoting the autonomy and fulfillment of self and promoting the common good through sacrifice and service to the community.

Of the many ways in which the members of our congregation moved beyond self to promote the greater good, what our church's first annual report for the year 1909-10 called the "advancement of liberalism dedicated to the advancement and uplifting of mankind," of the many ways in which we expressed that commitment, I want to mention just one in some detail.

In the years just after World War Two, we had fewer than a hundred members and still struggled to support full-time professional ministry; then something extraordinary happened. The members of this congregation led out in a nation-wide program, under the auspices of the Unitarian Service Committee, to send clothing, food, and medical supplies to the survivors of the catastrophic war in Europe, and joined with other Canadian Unitarians to raise tens of thousands of dollars for a foster-parent plan for children in European orphanages. There are amazing photographs in our archives showing UCV members and children of all ages intently at work in this monumental effort. By October 1945, over 90,000 pounds of clothing had been sent to Europe. And Unitarian churches, including our own, were clogged with supplies, which poured in as fast as they could be sorted, packed, and shipped by teams of volunteers. By 1954, we were still at it.

Unitarian Service Committee report announced that the Vancouver USC Branch had collected and shipped six tons of clothing to war-torn Korea, and had raised close to \$9000 for USC efforts.

I can only imagine the sense of satisfaction our church members felt in those years; a time when, according to one USC brochure, people across Canada knew that Unitarianism meant "faith in action." I don't think it's a coincidence that just one year after that 1954 report was issued, when this congregation was sharing selfless ministry to that extent, and without the services of a professional minister, that the UVC Board of Trustees sent out a circular letter to Unitarian churches and fellowships across Canada inquiring whether the time had finally arrived for us to create a national Unitarian organization. "The existence of Canada as a political entity, a nation, is a fact of

significance for the religious liberals who live here,” our Board wrote. “We have responsibilities toward the...life [of this] nation that are of collective concern to all Unitarians living in Canada.”

Within five years, that’s light speed for us, a Canadian Unitarian Council, designed to serve the entire country, was established. And in the next three decades this congregation created and ran two hostels for US men dodging the Vietnam draft and worked to integrate them into the life of this country; it sponsored post war boat people, refugees from Central America, Africa and Asia; hosted the founding of Greenpeace in 1970, a single parents food bank in 1985, Oak Counseling service in 1974, and joined with thousands of Vancouver residents in marches, meetings, and protests for nuclear disarmament and peace...the list goes on and on.

In 1937, in a speech presented to the Toronto Unitarian Church, Laurence Redfern asserted “that history has shown that invariably, when a church has reached a low ebb, it is revived when it champions a new and greater cause.” I think that is exactly what happened to Canadian Unitarians in general, and to the members of this church in particular, when they rallied to the work of the Unitarian Services Committee in spite of their relative weakness in numbers, lack of ministerial support, financial resources and organization. It created a national Unitarian identity and strength of vision and purpose for this congregation for decades, the fruits of which we still experience and value to this day.

Diversity, creating a safe haven, a fellowship for intellectual and spiritual exploration, overcoming financial and numerical challenges, finding ourselves by serving others...these are the foundations laid by our pioneering Vancouver Unitarians; I am struck by how much we are still building on those sure footings established in 1909. Remember they were described as “women and men with no wealth among them, and small social prestige. There is the usual proportion of cranks, theosophists, single taxers, long-haired men and short-haired women, but most seem sensible and reasonable [people].” Let us be mindful of them and of those who took up their work and vision—many of them of them are sitting here with us today. Together, let us celebrate this, our true community—enlivened by common memory, hope, and love.

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