

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock  
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Sara Mackey©

## What Is Church For?

Back in the early spring, I was talking with a woman I know about possible readings for her wedding, and I offered to look through some of my resources and send her some options. This woman knows that I have a theological education, and she knows that I preach, and I guess that's why she felt the need to caution me: "We don't want anything about God in our wedding." She also knows I'm a UU—so is she, if she were pressed to name her denomination, and yet still, she needed to make sure I understood: no God talk. Even though this woman knows me, she clearly must have some unconscious image in her mind that I ought to fit into because I have a seminary education, I work for the church and the seminary, and I attend church regularly. My daughter visited me a couple of months ago, my daughter who knows me well and has known me all her life, and I got the same feeling from talking for hours and hours with her. She seems to have the idea that because I love the church (and I'm talking here about the church universal, all denominations, the entire body of the faithful), I must think a certain way. Neither of these women understands fully, I don't think, what church is for me, or what church means to me. I think they both may have outdated understandings about church. Neither of them studies church, or keeps up much with news about church, so they, and probably most people who either do or don't show up in places of worship regularly, may have missed the body of work that has emerged in the past decade that deals with how church is not what it used to be. Everything else in the twenty-first century is changing faster than many of us can keep up with it. Surely we must recognize that church has to change as well, if it's to remain viable. But what does that mean? If church is not what it used to be, what is it going to be instead?

Diana Butler Bass is one of many theologians writing about this phenomenon. Her book *Christianity After Religion* is subtitled "The End of Church

and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening.” Butler Bass reports on a Gallup poll that reflected that between 1999 and 2009, there was a huge increase in the number of people who said they were both spiritual and religious. There was also a huge drop in the number of people who said they were religious only. Of course, we UUs, who love language and have a serious commitment to defining our terms clearly, know that we can’t attribute much meaning to that poll until we know what the words “religion” and “spirituality” mean to the people being polled. We have no way of knowing that, and naturally the terms mean different things to different people. Diana Butler Bass knows that, too, and she describes workshops that she has conducted where she invited the participants to do word association. Although the workshops took place all over the country with many different groups of people, the word lists that they created were very similar. She made two columns, one for religion, and one for spirituality, and she asked people to say words that they thought should go in each column. On the religion side of the chart, people suggested institution, organization, authority, dogma, structure, buildings, rules, order. Under spirituality, they listed searching, intuition, prayer, experience, connection, wisdom, doubt. (p. 69) Does this spirituality list sound familiar to us? It certainly reflects conversations I’ve had with UUs in various contexts regarding what drew them to Unitarian Universalism: we tend to resonate with the words on the spiritual side of Butler Bass’s chart. What we may not be so aware of is that this same kind of thinking, this same kind of longing, is far more prevalent than we may have imagined. This is a twenty-first century phenomenon.

Diana Butler Bass expands on her discussion when she reflects on certain questions. She says that the religious question is often a “how” question. Here’s a quote:

When religion focuses on externals, the primary question becomes *how*. How to organize a church? How to manage an institution? How to run a meeting? How to train volunteers? How to teach Sunday school? How to create a budget? Ask

*how* at a church meeting and someone will point you toward “how to” in a policy manual, a denominational handbook, canon law, or a business book. Ask a banker or a lawyer. Hire a consultant, engage a marketing company. Institutions and organizations demand technical expertise, trained managers, program specialists, and strategic planners. In the pursuit of expertise, religious communities lose their sense of being sacred locales for spiritual experience.

(p. 143)

On the other hand, says Diana Butler Bass, there are spiritual questions that are fundamentally different from the religious questions. One spiritual question is “*What* do we do?” What are our practices? What is it that we do to help us be more fully alive and more fully open to our best ourselves and to that which is sacred? Another spiritual question is “*Why*?” Why do we do this? When we are aware of the meaning of what we do in the life of the church, it becomes truly spiritual practice.

If church is changing, then, and if it's changing in ways that make more sense to us as Unitarian Universalists, then surely it makes sense also for us to be intentional about naming what this gathering that we call the church means. We need to take a broad view when we engage this question—not “What does the church mean to *me*?” which is often how the question is framed. Rather, we can ask, “What does the church mean to the world?” You've heard me say before that our Unitarian Universalism has its roots in Christianity, and when we ask that question in the context of the Christian faith, I think it's fair to skip all the doctrine *about* Christianity and go straight to Jesus himself. Jesus was a healer—Marcus Borg says that there are more healing stories about Jesus than about anyone else in the Jewish tradition. He was a teacher as well, and yet when people heard that Jesus was in town, they went to see him because they wanted healing. Even when he taught, his message was about healing. There's a story in the New Testament book of Luke about Jesus going to the synagogue to teach

and taking the scroll and reading the ancient prophecy that promised that someone would come who would bring good news to the poor, proclaim liberty to the captives...and Jesus said, "That's me. I'm here now. I've got good news."

When I was in seminary I had a professor who pointed out that the word gospel means good news, and when we preach, we accept the responsibility of studying the text as carefully and diligently as we need to until we find and understand the good news in that text. And then we tell it. Even with the most challenging text, we don't get to just reject it. We have to work around in it until we find the good news. So if I were called to answer the question, "What is the church for?" I would say the church is for finding and announcing good news. Another way to say it is that the church is for holding hope and keeping it safe. You've heard me say before that hope is not a feeling—that's optimism. Hope is a decision, a choice, and choosing hope instead of despair, making that choice every day, is a spiritual practice. It's a spiritual practice that church can support us in, so that when any one of us loses heart, there are always others around to say come on, we've got you covered, if you can't hope today, we'll hope for you. This is always, I believe, what the church has been for—not what religion has been for, perhaps, but always what the church has been for. The story of Christianity from the beginning has been a story of the wrong people doing the wrong things in the name of hope. The one that's going to change everything, so the story goes, is some displaced baby, not a powerful ruler. When the baby grew up he went around telling people you've heard it said in the scriptures...this...but I say unto you...something different, something radical. I say to you love your neighbor. This one who changed everything said anybody can sit at the table with me, everybody belongs at my table. He said I love you, and even when I'm gone my love is still going to be with you. According to the old stories, after he was executed he came back to life. For most of us, that may be too much of a challenge, too hard to believe. And yet we all know people who have experienced excruciating losses and defeats and have come through that to

the other side different, renewed, reborn. The essential message of the church has always been one of hope.

What do we do, then, to make that hope an active power in the world? We don't want to practice it and nurture it just for ourselves. What to do becomes clear over time, person by person, congregation by congregation, through intentional conversations and personal practice in which we ask ourselves "what" and "why" questions before we ask ourselves "how" questions. Religion in twenty-first century America is changing, and it's changing in a way that is going to make the entire concept of what it means to be a religious person more compatible with Unitarian Universalist convictions. We are participants in this change simply based on the fact that we're churchgoers in this time and place in history. We are participants in this new spiritual awakening.

And so may it be.