

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM AS A WORLD FAITH MOVEMENT

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

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Why do we come together? Why have we sacrificed to build this Fellowship so that we can come together? There are probably as many answers to those questions as we have people in this room today. I'm going to suggest that at least in part our commitment has to do with our view of life, with how we want to live our short lives, and that we are drawn to others who are open to our perspective on the "big questions."

I think of an analogy that may seem like a stretch. Who pays very serious money and braves the traffic to sit in rain, sleet, or snow with thousands of other fans to watch a bunch of prosperous athletes play football on a Sunday afternoon? The score could be learned by newspaper or Internet. The game could be watched in greater detail in the comfort of home or bar. Likewise, Harley Davidson owners, or Corvette owners gather across the country to celebrate the common love of their toys. I think **it is the getting together** with like-minded people, with **being there** to show support. So it is with gathering with like-minded folks at our Fellowship – getting together, being there, showing support. Personally I take much more away from my time at UUFR than just a game score.

Getting to know our "brothers and sisters" in spirit, and learning more about our heritage, encourages us in the way we choose to live our lives. As Unitarian Universalists we are clearly a minority faith in a world that has been dominated for centuries by dogmatic religion. Nowhere are we a majority, or even a very large minority. World history has been dominated by religious-political alliances – "Church and Crown." Laws in most nations, including the United States, reflect religious dogma. Unitarianism has been characterized by nonconformity to this traditional alliance of religion and political control. We share such views not only with each other but also across borders and around the world. We are the skeptics. We believe we can find our own definition of "the divine." We believe in "the inherent dignity and worth of EVERY person." We believe in our own "free and responsible search for truth and meaning."

We encourage each other in our courageous stand by coming together. Beyond our small fellowship here we affiliate with the UUs of our geographic region as members of the Tidewater UU Cluster of churches. Nationally, we are part of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Churches. Some of our members have attended those wonderful annual General Assemblies of the UUA. Beyond the national U.S. perspective, we have the opportunity to affiliate with Unitarians around the world who tend to share our humanistic embrace of life. The organization that promotes and supports such global affiliation is the Unitarian Universalist Partner Church Council (UUPCC).

The UUPCC is an independent organization affiliated with the UUA. It is supported by donations from individuals, from UU churches, and by the UUA itself.

The UUPCC Vision:

We envision a worldwide Unitarian and Unitarian Universalist community that promotes peace, justice, and liberty for all, supported by partnerships that are integral to congregational life.

The UUPCC plays several roles. It not only organizes partnering relationships between churches in the U.S. and those of other countries, it also arranges group exchanges between churches in the U.S. and in other countries. Such exchanges include musical groups, working groups, and student exchanges at elementary, high school, and university level. UUPCC provides scholarships to assist people who would like to travel on a visit – a “pilgrimage” – to some international UU church. The original Unitarian churches of Transylvania in Romania are typical chosen destinations for individuals and groups. Typical working groups travel to less developed countries such as in Africa or the Philippines to help with community projects.

Partner countries in the UUPCC include the UK, Hungary, Czech Republic, Romania, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, Burundi, India, Hong Kong (China), the Philippines, Canada, and Mexico.

Our own fellowship joined the UUPCC this past year and expressed our interest in partnering. UUPCC found a Unitarian congregation in England that expressed an interest in a U.S. partnership and seemed to be an ideal partner. The Walmsley Unitarian Chapel in Egerton is in a rural village area of northern England. It has fifty-some members as we do. [SHOW MAP AND PHOTO] After we were introduced to each other by the questionnaires we submitted, our respective leadership boards decided to approve the relationship. During the past few months I have been exchanging information and ideas with the Walmsley Chapel minister, Rev. Helen Mills, sharing information about UUFR and about the region where we live, and I have been learning more about the Walmsley Chapel and about the UK Unitarians.

I'd like to tell you a little more about our partner church. Our own congregation is about fifteen years old; theirs is more than 350 years old. In the 1600s Walmsley was inhabited by Presbyterians – a group not in conformity with the official Church of England. The English “Act of Uniformity” in 1662 required all clergymen to use the Prayer Book of the English church – so the Presbyterians of Walmsley were forbidden to worship in their chapel or in their homes. Under cover of night they used to assemble in a wild and lonely spot. A watchman had to be appointed to warn of the approach of any hostile party. This state of affairs continued until the Toleration Act was passed in 1689 and they were able to build their own place of worship. They built their own church, and the Walmsley Chapel we see now was built in 1713. Even then their troubles were not over as they were met with staunch

opposition from the Anglican clergy and later still from the Congregationalists. According to their history, there were come pretty stormy scenes.

I was curious about the beliefs of the UK Unitarians. They hold many beliefs that we would find congenial to ours. The traditional concept of "Unitarian," meaning one, rather than three gods, has been broadened to embrace the oneness of humanity, the oneness of the world, and the oneness of the independent web of life. They believe that faith should be free from the constraints imposed by others and that no one should dictate what another person may or may not believe. There is no "party line." They believe that "God" is a subjective word and not to be defined by others – everyone should be free to "encounter the Great Mystery for himself or herself." Some UK Unitarians use more Christian-like language to describe their belief. Others experience God as a unifying and life-giving spirit, the source of all being, the universal process that comes to consciousness as love. Some use the word "God" to signify the human ideal, and to experience God as an inward presence. Some avoid using the word "God." Sound familiar?

I asked Rev. Helen Mills, the Walmsley minister, about herself, and about the beliefs and practices in our new partner church. Helen Mills is a graduate in psychology and religious studies. She spent time in the Royal Air Force and worked with charitable organizations. About her beliefs, and about the spiritual practices at Walmsley, she writes:

If you ask what Unitarianism is, you get many different answers from different people, that is the beauty of it I think, the religious freedom. She says: For me, it's about my belief that we are on this earth to learn greater wisdom and compassion for ourselves and for each other and that the spiritual teachings can help us in this way. A practical spirituality may help us to manage the situation we face in our lives and understanding ourselves better may enhance our experiences in life.

I asked about the Walmsley congregation, about their worship services and rituals, and about the activities of the Chapel. She said:

Like you we have very few lifelong Unitarians and many have come from other churches such as Church of England, Methodist, Catholic, etc. Walmsley has a history based upon the Christian tradition and I'm aware that the two ministers prior to me were "collar wearing" ministers. ... It is a slight departure from the past, bringing me in. I would describe myself as a Unitarian. I value highly the teachings of Jesus, whilst much of my study and interest has been that at the depth of all the world religions lies the same message (and it has only become changed and sometimes distorted by human beings). I guess people describe me as more spiritually oriented and I do feel that the path of the spirit lies beyond the many external forms of religion and that in our Unitarian churches we have a good chance of speaking to more people in today's world. ... the people of Walmsley are very open minded to relating to what people are looking for now, as an example, with the change in the law here in relation to same-sex marriage ... Walmsley as a majority have embraced this and we are soon to become licensed for same-sex marriage ceremonies at our chapel.

Regarding the services at Walmsley, their typical order of service looks a lot like ours. After an opening song there is a welcome followed by “notices” – our treasured “brief announcements.” After another hymn there is a time for prayers, and the Lord’s Prayer is recited. Rev. Mills says this held to be important to many members. They provide a children’s story, after which the children are excused to attend Sunday School. A meditative period of prayer and silence follows another hymn. A reading and a sermon follow. Two of their favorite hymns are on our Order of Service today – “Morning Has Broken,” and “We’ll Build a Land.”

The activities of their small chapel are extensive – like ours. The Walmsley Chapel is used for many community events. They host yoga classes, fitness (such as Zumba), dance, and community choral performances. They have formed a meditation group that meets once a week. They even an iPad group that meets. Walmsley hosts a Christmas Fair that sounds wonderful, with the exchange of crafts, foods, games, and so on. During the season of Advent they have a “carols by candlelight” service with brass band and seasonal readings, attended by many who don’t usually attend Sunday services.

Helen Mills and I discussed how we might start to bring our individual members in contact with each other. Our mutual suggestion is that we ask our members who might be interested in contact with each other, who would like to widen our understanding outside our own congregations. I would like to get a list of our people who might be interested in corresponding with some of the Walmsley folks. I’d like to get your names, email address (or postal address), and have you write just a line or two about yourself. For example, “I am a grandfather, raised in the American west as a conservative Christian and have come to UU in my adulthood as a more satisfying way to approach my questions and philosophy of life.”

I am convinced that reaching out, beyond our borders, sharing our stories and hearing those of others can be richly rewarding. Already I have found this to me the case in my exchanges with Rev. Mills. I can visualize a future service here at which we can take turns sharing what we have learned and our thoughts about this sharing. I can visualize that some may, in time, travel to the beautiful English countryside to visit in person with our partner church members. Perhaps we could encourage Walmsley to visit us, individually, or to send a group. As Thea told me when I discussed it with her, we could all make room for some folks to stay in our homes.

Many of us have found a spiritual home in our Unitarian Universalist experience. Sharing with a wider group, reaching out across our boundaries, can only deepen our experience and bring the joy of fellowship.

What are your questions?

(PASS OUT CARDS DURING QUESTION PERIOD)

CLOSING WORDS:

Now may we return to our homes with a renewed sense of the joy we have found in coming together. May we imagine the possibilities of extending our fellowship with others in our region and beyond our own boundaries. In this season of reflection on peace, and love for the world, may we let our lights shine.