

Owning Our Church
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 UCV

Reading Intro: "I Call that Church Free" by James Luther Adams

*I call that church free which enters into covenant with the ultimate source of existence,
 That sustaining and transforming power not made with human hands.
 It binds together families and generations, protecting against the idolatry of any human claim to absolute
 truth or authority.
 This covenant is the charter and responsibility and joy of worship in the face of death as well as life.
 I call that church free which brings individuals into a caring, trusting fellowship,
 That protects and nourishes their integrity and spiritual freedom...
 It is open to insight and conscience from every source; it bursts through rigid tradition, giving rise to new and
 living language, to new and broader fellowship.
 It is a pilgrim church, a servant church, on an adventure of the spirit.
 The goal is the prophethood and priesthood of all believers,
 the one for the liberty of prophesying, the other for the ministry of healing.
 It aims to find unity in diversity under the promptings of the spirit "that bloweth where it listeth... and maketh
 all things new."*

When Unitarian historian and theologian James Luther Adams wrote those words thirty years ago, he was reaching back into a vast, rich vein of Unitarian belief, practice, and experience in the work of creating and sustaining a very particular and crucial way that Unitarian women and men decided to live their religion concretely, publicly, and socially in real time and space, in the full light of day, and for all to see. Adams calls it a church that is free; that is, an unusual kind of assembly of folks called forth and gathered together by an ultimate power that surpasses you and me; one that convokes us and sends us out into the world as a worshipping, seeking, and serving congregation of "individuals" on "an adventure of the spirit"; a particular kind of people: people who voluntarily bind themselves to one another by a covenant, a promise of care and trust; it's a "fellowship" of women, children, and men gathered in the "joy of common worship"; people mindful of and yet willing to burst through "rigid traditions," because they trust in the integrity of their informed "insight and conscience as guides," and because they do not stand alone. Not alone, rather they, we, stand within the embrace of a "charter of responsibility," together in the "face of life and death," united in a promise to one another, united in our diversity, united in a common ministry to be prophets for justice, priests in worship, fellow labourers in community, teachers for knowledge, mentors toward wisdom, and servants in "the ministry of healing."

This language, these terms, this vision and the living assembly they describe are nearly five hundred years old. And yet, for me, they are both breathtakingly provocative and as new as today: because dear people it's all about us; about the Unitarian Church of Vancouver, and how we decided to convoke this congregation into existence nearly a century ago, and how, through times both good and bad, in peace and crisis, feast and famine, we have sustained its work, spread its vision, and how we will yet make it to flourish in this city for decades to come!

Let me explain. When Adams talks about adults assembled freely and without constraint in the practice of joyful worship and justice making, he is describing the way in which Unitarians long ago decided to gather and act out their religious and ethical beliefs and ideals. That public form of assembly and of doing religion that we decided to embrace as most true of us and most capable for enabling us to achieve our beliefs and ideals is called congregational polity. Polity is a form or system of government by which communities are organised and through which they work to achieve their ideals for what they consider to be the good life. A

polity may be a monarchy, it may be a dictatorship of the proletariat, a representative democracy; it may be an episcopacy or government wherein authority to rule is invested in bishops. Polities can be theocratic, hierarchical, matriarchal, or it may be dominated exclusively by the rule of men.

“Governance—the structures people set up to manage themselves in religion or the state—is a visible testimony to what they say they believe.” Forms of government are crucially important because they define the ways in which we believe human beings should best be related to one another. Behind these social forms of governance stand our most basic beliefs and insights about the nature of being fully human. If, for example, we believe that people are naturally incapable of governing themselves, then forms of hierarchy and deference to authorities religious and secular are sought out, justified, and imposed upon those to be governed by elites that supposedly possess superior wisdom, birth, and power.

Through long centuries of misrule, violence, corruption, and the suppression of ideas, beliefs and freedoms, religious and political radicals in the 16th and 17th centuries knew by grievous experience that deference to traditional and remote religious and political potentates was a noxious, corrosive blight on the human project, a profound obstacle that blocked the achievement of our full, precious and unique humanity as profane and spiritual beings. And so they set about to bring these lords of misrule down, and to introduce local, democratic forms of governance in state and in religion. We here are the direct heirs of the work of those radical reformers of political and religious governance.

And in particular, in 1648, an assembly of ministers and lay church members gathered together in Cambridge, Massachusetts and hammered out a platform for congregational polity whose basic principles and structures of governance influence and guide the way Unitarians, and other faith groups in North America, do religion in community to the present day. Congregational polity means direct, democratic, local self-rule. Unitarian congregations are self-governing, self-defining, and self-financing. As need arises, we create our own congregations. We write our own by-laws. We govern ourselves through open and equal consultation and through the general business meetings of the congregation. We elect our own, local leadership. We call and ordain our ministers. We staff our committees and working groups. We teach our children and each other. We minister and care for each other through joys and sorrows, and in the face of life and death.

Over the centuries, fundamental Unitarian beliefs and ideas about the nature of God have changed and evolved. Our traditional ideas about the role of women in society and in ministry, and our understandings of human sexuality have transformed utterly. Exclusive deference to our radical Christian and Jewish roots has given way and opened up to include a full and welcome embrace of the insights and histories of other faith traditions and the achievements and methods of the sciences. Our once starry-eyed, romantic belief in the inexorable march of human progress has been chastened and sobered-up in view of the extensive disasters we have visited upon the human family and on the biosphere.

In all of these, change has been a constant in Unitarianism. But the principle and practice of congregational polity in our tradition has proven to be remarkably resilient and constant. And I think the reason is simple. Embodiment is a key expression of our fundamental understanding of what it means to be human. And congregational polity, our form of communal embodiment, expresses what we understand is most true about us, or what we hope to be most true. Unitarians have decided that the paramount responsibility of religion is to promote the inherent worth and dignity of each person. And within the horizons to which we have been born, and in which we have come of age, we have concluded that the political and communal consequences of our commitment to the flourishing of each person is a form of governance that is profoundly local, democratic, and self-financing. There is no one out there who will save us. The responsibility to make religion real is entirely on our shoulders. We own it. And we will fail or flourish in our historic and communal endeavour to promote the well-being of our members, our dignity, our spiritual and ethical growth, our roles as stewards of the environment, our ministry of caring and trust to each other, and the well-being, vitality

and efficacy of the Unitarian Church of Vancouver to the degree that we embrace and practice congregational polity.

We will flourish, or limp along, or die, or we will infuse new life in this beloved community. We practice congregational polity, we invest and claim ownership in our congregation each time we show up and worship together. Each time we patiently listen to each others' stories of woe and joy. Each time we encounter each other honestly and compassionately. Each classroom of children we teach. Each vote we cast at a congregational meeting, hymn we sing, committee we join, and yes, each year when we launch out with an annual pledge drive in hopes that this year we will pay our bills and fund the mission and future of this community; when we do that, we join with the Unitarians of this city in days gone by, and with Unitarians across the centuries and around the world to heartily affirm and to make real what we say we believe, and what we own truly as ours because we have reached down deep and given according to what we have and what we value.

Twenty-two years ago, I experienced a concrete lesson in the power of ownership; of investment in a vision, and of how to express one's membership in an embodied community. I went with my partner Diana and our young children to Israel where I had a fellowship to participate in an interfaith program of study and dialogue. We lived in a small apartment on western edge of Jerusalem right next to the Jerusalem forest. Part of our strategy to cope with three very energetic young boys was to take frequent hikes on the myriad trails that thread through the nearby hillsides and woods. On the one of our first forest walks I sat down next to small evergreen, and then noticed something unusual: a small bronze plaque placed at the foot of the tree that read something like this:

"In thanks to Sadie Schwartz of Winnipeg, Manitoba, whose gift made the planting of this tree possible." And then I saw that each tree in the forest had a companion plaque recognising and thanking its benefactor; and then it hit me: a whole forest grew on the hillsides outside of Jerusalem due to the generous giving of women and men from around the world!

From there, and for the rest of my stay in Israel, I became acutely attuned to innumerable signs of how stone by stone, and tree by tree, a nation was constructed and made beautiful because of gifts and bequests. Acutely attuned and made aware, as well, of how each gift was acknowledged, thanked and celebrated. This kind of ownership is intimate, concrete, and deep. And it welcomes engaged, democratic involvement in public and political life. I never had seen, before or since then, such passionate, informed debates over the meaning and vision of a community and its polity. The pros and cons of the Occupation, the tragic history of displacement of Palestinians, the role of religion in society, the shame of domestic social inequities, these and more, were freely, frequently, openly argued over on buses, in cafes, in government, and in the freewheeling Israeli press. Would that there was more of this kind of diffuse and passionate ownership and its fruits in this congregation, in our city, our province and in this nation! Ownership grows a forest, builds a nation, and provokes passionate engagement in defining the meaning and future of a people and their polity.

Four years ago, I began my ministry with you in a period of crisis. You had experienced painful turnovers and transitions in professional ministry. There was a serious chronic conflict in our religious education programme. The long-serving members of our Care and Concern Committee, most of who were now in their eighties, were exhausted and wanted to pass on the work to others. Our youth and young adult programmes were moribund. There had been conflicts in our music programme; evident wear and tear on our buildings and furnishings, and chronic deficits in our operating expenses. You had been passing through a long night. And if not for the resolute fidelity of many of you to stick it out, to live it through, and to "own" this place, to financially sustain its work and to volunteer your time and talents in service to the congregation, we would today, truly, be in perilous straits.

But as surely as the wheel of nature has turned from winter to spring, so too, the wheel of the vessel of this ship, that we call our congregation, has turned. The seas are less perilous, our course clearer and our prospects...? Well, that's up to us isn't it?

But consider what we have achieved in a few short years. 110 people have joined this congregation and we welcome a diverse membership gay and straight, pagan and humanist, young and old. We have honoured our past by recognising and appreciating the contribution of our minister and music director emeritus; by successfully carrying through a Capital Campaign that enabled us to upgrade and replace furnaces, and to repaint, re-carpet, refurbish, and redo trim, rooms, furniture and our kitchen. We held a wonderful celebration and exhibit honouring the 40 th anniversary of the dedication of these buildings and grounds; Patience Towler and others have brought order to the chaos of our archives; and we are laying the groundwork for celebrating the 100 th anniversary of the UCV in 2009.

We are paying due attention to our present by bringing new life and substance to our religious education programme, to our ministry of care and concern by deputizing the entire congregation, to the work of communicating what's going on in this extraordinary place with a new website and printed brochures. I want to thank you for hiring an Administrative Director who has lightened my administrative burdens, boosted staff morale, and secured responsible new renters. So many of our committees are strong; they are a pleasure to work with; they serve us well and as best they can. Our choir just gets better and better; our chaplains do marvelous work in representing us and serving the wider community. We dig and plant and mow, we meet in covenant groups, host Valentine's festival, we turn in circle dances, and explore in adult ed classes.

And finally, as well, we have made significant strides to secure a viable future. We crafted a fine mission vision statement; we've launched a new campus ministry programme. New infants have been born and more on the way. And our youth? They are Exhibit A in what has changed in this place. From four to six lonely souls on Thursday nights, we now have two dozen kids signed up; and ten of them are in New York City right now attending a UN International Youth Conference.

Folks, if we don't blow it, we are going to make it. If we can set our own house in order, and help it thrive through generous giving of our time and our money—because remember there's no one out there who's going to save us—if we can do this, we will become a congregation that attracts others beyond our doors seeking a religious and ethical community that truly addresses their spiritual needs and their need for a meaningful community. The choice is ours.