

“Faith Without Borders”

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February 27, 2008

“The future is not someplace we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths to it are not found but made. The activity of making them changes both the maker and the destination.”

--Paris Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

This past November, in my role as Chair of the Board of the Unitarian Universalist Partner Church Council, I attended a meeting of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists in beautiful Oberwesel, Germany, on the banks of the famous Rhine River. I returned with a full heart and with a revived and profound sense of the importance of our liberal religious movement to a world divided by religious violence. I returned with a heart overflowing, having reconnected in friendship and love with some old friends, and having made some wonderful new ones.

In Germany I was able to spend some time with my friend Arpad Szabo, Bishop of the Unitarian Church of Transylvania, and with other members of the delegation of that church, some of whom I have met before, and some of whom have become fast new friends. I especially enjoyed a late evening discussion of English Romantic poetry with the Rev. Pearl G. Marbaniang, a wonderful leader and Director of Religious Education in the Unitarian Union of North East India, other wise known as the Unitarian Church of the Khasi Hills. Who would think that two people of such disparate backgrounds and experiences of life in such distant parts of the world might share a mutual love of the poet John Keats? I was introduced to Tjahjadi Nugroho, founder of the Global Church of God in Indonesia and dedicated proponent of interfaith dialogue between Christians, Muslims, and others throughout Asia. His dream? To build a Unitarian mega-church in Indonesia. Who'd have thought (though we might find their three hour worship services a bit on the long side)!

I discovered that there are emerging Unitarian groups in several countries in

Africa, including the Congo, Kenya, Nigeria, Burundi, and Uganda. I met the charismatic young ministers of several of these churches. At least one of these Unitarian groups, the one in Lagos, Nigeria, has been around for 87 years, but the others are relatively new.

I spent time speaking with Roberto Rosso, a young Italian man in a wheelchair who discovered Unitarian Universalism on the internet and has since founded the Congregazione Italiana Christiana Unitariana. He spoke movingly to us of the difficulty of pursuing a liberal religious path in a country so heavily dominated by the Roman Catholic Church. He is sometimes accused of Satanism! And I met the wonderfully soft-spoken Esteban Obregon, founder of a Unitarian Universalist group in Mexico City. I already knew that there was a thriving Unitarian Universalist church in the Philippines, but I was grateful finally to meet one of its outstanding leaders, Rebecca Siennes.

I think perhaps the most interesting aspect of this encounter is that almost all of these groups are indigenous to the countries in which they are located. Although there are some ex-patriot American UU groups in France and Germany, most of the groups in the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists, including those in France and Germany, are natives of the lands where they are found. They conduct worship in their native tongues. Altogether, there are twenty-three Unitarian or Universalist groups represented by the ICUU, as it is familiarly known. In addition to Canada and the United States, there are established churches in Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. There are, in addition to those groups I have already mentioned, existing congregations in Spain, Denmark, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Finland, and Argentina. Cuba, believe or not, currently has two Unitarian Universalist groups. And there is another emerging group in far-off Bolivia. There may even be small groups in Sri Lanka and Pakistan.

What is remarkable is that most of these groups have grown up independently, often completely unaware that there are others who share their religious values and beliefs. Almost all of them have adopted the symbol of a flaming chalice. Everyone I spoke with shares an Emersonian belief in an individual spark of the divine within the human being. All of them are fiercely opposed to theological dogmatism. There seems to be among them all a shared understanding that religion is not about belief, but about

the search for each person's "hidden wholeness."

These groups are often refreshingly diverse in their membership, particularly racially. They are proof that the underlying principles of Unitarianism and Universalism can exist and thrive outside of our usual North American demographic of middle and upper-middle class white-and-educated homogeneity. In the Khasi Hills of India, for example, few can afford an education beyond elementary school.

Yet, these are people who share our fundamental affirmations: freedom of conscience in matters of religion; tolerance of those whose religious beliefs differ from our own; a reasoned approach to religious ideas and sacred texts; and a willingness to change and grow in our religious understandings. They get it.

In spite of the very real theological differences--some of these groups maintain a biblical and Christian stance, while others are more humanistic in approach--all are in basic agreement with the principles of the ICUU: liberty of conscience and individual thought in matters of faith, the inherent worth and dignity of every person, justice and compassion in human relations, and responsible stewardship of the earth's living system

Is it possible that UUism is finally beginning to fulfill its promise and becoming a truly global faith, a faith without borders? Though I personally had long been aware that Unitarians existed in places like Transylvania, where my own congregation has a long-standing partnership, and in India and the Philippines, I had no idea of the breadth of interest in and commitment to our faith. Given knowledge of it, our religious approach obviously has a more than national appeal. I find it amazingly exciting and reassuring, at this most difficult time in world history, when so many are divided by religion, when so much violence is the result of religious disagreements, that our liberal religious way of openness and tolerance is finally taking on a more distinctly international flavor.

Not that many of these groups do not face obstacles, both external and internal, to their ultimate success. Many of them are poor, and most of them lack professional leadership or a trained ministry. But in today's world of internet communications it is clear that it is becoming much easier for people around the world to access information about our faith and to find allies in it. And finally there is an organization – ICUU – which, it is hoped, can assist and support these groups in their struggles to become viable, worshipping, liberal religious communities, part of a world-wide community of

Unitarianism, Universalism, and Unitarian Universalism.

In the meantime, many of these groups continue to meet in the homes of their members, or even, in the case of the small group in Bolivia, outdoors. Some, such as those in Cuba, must meet surreptitiously and secretly. Some have difficulty proving to the political authorities that their purpose is a religious one. There are, not surprisingly, internal power struggles in some of them. Many of them are poor, some even in communities without access to running water. Just getting to them and from them over terrible roads can be a problem. Often the members have only rudimentary knowledge of how to run an institution, often they have little practical knowledge of how democracy works. Indeed, in some African countries, with their deep traditional and tribal divisions and tyrannical majorities, it is not even clear that western-style democracy can succeed.

But I am inspired by their dedication, by their faith, by their hope, and most importantly, by their love. We have brothers and sisters in unexpected places, my friends, people who think as we think and whose greatest dream is simply to be able to worship freely, as we are blessed to be able to do.

It is always a gift to be able to travel beyond the borders of what is familiar and known and to discover new ways of seeing and understanding our world. Truly, it is good to be together, even, or especially, in all of our beautiful and unique differences.

I pray that our faith will continue to grow and to flourish, and that it will provide a religious home to more and more people in generations yet to come. That is why I am so passionately committed to the work of the Unitarian Universalist Partner Church Council, which seeks to partner congregations in North America with liberal churches and organizations around the world. (I would be happy to speak to you about partnership and becoming a partner church following the service this morning.)

In a recent theological symposium, held in Kolozsvar/Cluj, Romania, former Unitarian Universalist Association President John Buehrens said,

Our theological house may be small, fragile, and seem in danger of being blown over in the storms and tumults of our time. But, at its best, it is a vital House of Hope, not only for ourselves, but for many who have never even heard our name. Let us dialogue about its future, that we might repair, rebuild, strengthen, expand

and fulfill the promise inherent in our heritage, hoping that we might yet be part of, and catalysts for, humanity's saving remnant.

It is something like that vision, and that hope, that originally led me into the ministry. May we all, together, continue to build that House of Hope for all who may wish to enter it. Amen.

