

The Style of Unitarian communities

What are Unitarian communities like? Our major historian Earl Morse Wilbur, surveying from North America the three and half centuries since modern Unitarianism emerged in Transylvania (north west Romania) and Poland, wrote that the Unitarian movement was characterised by three principles:

complete mental freedom, unrestricted use of reason, and
generous tolerance¹

This observation indicates that Unitarian communities are distinguished from other churches more by their style than by their content. The significant point is that no one can be excluded from a Unitarian church on grounds of belief. Belonging by dissent and disbelief is quite in order. One result of this open style of community is that seekers, agnostics and religious rebels often find safe haven in Unitarian churches. In Unitarian churches people are encouraged to find their own level of faith, and very often this is a healing experience—simply to be oneself and feel all right about it.

Sometimes people ask 'What does the Unitarian church believe?' but that is not an appropriate question. It is like asking 'What does a family believe?' or 'What does a university believe?' Both are inappropriate questions. More appropriate questions would be 'What is a Unitarian church like?' or 'What does a Unitarian church do?'

Unitarian community is based on the human need for people to belong and associate and share. It is 'a Great Conversation about human nature, God, human destiny, and the most desirable way to take the next step in human betterment'²? But the conversation isn't simply vigorous debate about great issues. It may include that, but it also includes the private soul at prayer within the community and something of the older understanding of conversation which involved human relating and interacting. In other words the conversation involves doing things together either for the life of the church community or for the larger community beyond. A Unitarian church exists to improve both heart and mind and to help make us better persons in a better world.

Unitarians expect to remain personally responsible for their faith, which they refine and purify, not in measurement against some creed or scripture, but in Great Conversation, since 'truth is not a personal vision but the best consensus of informed minds'³

1. *A History of Unitarianism in Transylvania, England, and America* (Harvard, 1945) p.5

2. Kenneth K. Marshall *Journal of the Liberal Ministry* (Fall 1967)

3. Ralph Helverson *Ten Commandments for an Age of Ambiguity*