

What Is Church For?

by Rev. Don Garrett

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I spent a decade – the 1980s – building and running a business providing typesetting, graphic design, and production services for advertising agencies and large corporations in the Research Triangle Park area of North Carolina.

It was a fabulous adventure. I was living the American dream of working hard and creating a prosperous future. I worked out of a cabin in the woods outside town with a partner who picked up and delivered the work to our customers.

This kind of hard work takes a lot of time and I would often work 10, 12, 14 hour days, sometimes for weeks in a row. But it was worth it, I felt, doing high quality creative work for important customers who expressed their appreciation by paying their bills.

When the business suddenly failed at the end of the decade, I found myself adrift and confused. I got a job with a former customer, so I landed on my feet, although I had lost the fortune I thought I'd earned.

But I hadn't noticed that I had become socially isolated. I had no friends or connections. I'd spent so much time alone in my cabin working under extreme pressure and with no social contact that I'd grown alienated and withdrawn. I found myself anxious in crowds. I realized this was a problem but had no idea how to deal with it.

I decided to try going to church, specifically, the Community Church of Chapel Hill, North Carolina. I enjoyed sitting in the sanctuary for service, singing hymns and listening to the sermons, but found coffee hour difficult to endure. Some Sundays I could only stand it for a minute or two before I was overwhelmed with anxiety and needed to flee to the parking lot and the safety of my own home.

But this was a friendly church. After a few months, a man sitting behind me told me that I had a good singing voice and should join the choir. The choir sang in a balcony over the back of the sanctuary so I could sing without anyone

looking at me. I liked being able to be part of the service without drawing attention to myself.

The choir was also a close-knit community. People asked me questions, got to know me and told me about themselves. Our time together was as social as it was musical. We cared about each other. They cared about me and helped me to feel safe. I began to be able to enjoy coffee hour for longer and longer periods.

I joined the Worship Committee, meeting monthly. They welcomed me and asked nothing of me for a long time. It was enough for them that I just be part of the team – and that was enough for me, too.

I gradually became more comfortable, with more friends, spending more time together. There was a weekday evening meditation service and potluck dinner that was its own little congregation and I enjoyed that sense of belonging.

Eventually I began to have things to say in the larger venues. The Worship Committee encouraged me to lead a few lay services. I was elected to the Board. And, well, you can see where all this led.

Some years later after I'd graduated from divinity school and was serving an internship at the Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, my supervisor, the Rev. Arvid Straube, told me that he believed that Unitarian Universalist churches saved souls, in this life, not some afterlife. We save souls from meaninglessness, alienation, and despair. That was certainly my experience. I can sing the hymn, "Amazing Grace," with the conviction of personal experience, "That saved a wretch like me . . . I once was lost, but now I'm found."

Last month, I spoke about what religion was for, focusing on an evolutionary perspective. I said that humans are truly remarkable creatures. We represent an unprecedented evolutionary leap. Humans are so incredibly intelligent and adaptable that we dominate every ecosystem on the planet, so when we reach the limits of our resources, we don't just pollute our nest or our valley like other species do – we overtax the whole planet. Global warming and resource depletion on a grand scale are producing planetary consequences that are hostile to human life.

But, like I said, this is just what species do.

Our evolutionary epoch was dominated by threats to survival in a hostile world. Fear, greed, anxiety, and competition for limited resources determined who lived and who died.

But even during this evolutionary epoch there were individuals who noticed that there was another side of human nature that had made huge evolutionary advances: affiliation, which is to say, love. That we had capacities for a deeper connection with others, capacities for a broader, more inclusive bonding of selfless love that were different from those of competition and survival. They found capacities for experiences of transcendent relatedness that seemed to come from beyond the realms of struggle and survival, competition and appetite. These seemed so different from their earthly lives that they tended to give them a name that placed them beyond normal experience: they often called these human capacities for loving, transcendent unity by the name, “God.”

From the very beginning, religion has taught that there is a greater fulfillment than survival-based appetites can offer, and that it is to be found in relationship and attachment: in love.

And it was love that brought me into the fold at the Community Church of Chapel Hill. I had been caught up in the instincts of survival and accomplishment; I had given myself over to the demons of anxiety and alienation that had smothered my soul’s joy. It was enough to be part of the church community. I felt loved, I felt cared about, I felt safe.

We know that religion is the teaching of the truth that love is the primary path to human fulfillment. Religion teaches us about the destructiveness of negative emotions, that people motivated by compassion and connection are happier and more fulfilled than those motivated by greed, fear and defensiveness. And that lives and communities based in compassion and connection are richer and more nourishing to human potential than those based in greed, fear and defensiveness.

While I spoke in the abstract about what religion is for, I think that my experience with the Community Church of Chapel Hill points to the answer to the question, “What is church for?” Churches are the workshops where we practice the teachings of love.

Last June at our General Assembly in Charlotte, North Carolina, I attended a workshop led by Robert Zelinski. It was called, “Got Purpose?” He talked in depth about the kind of mission statements that our churches tend to have. He said that they tend to be generic, uninspired, vague, and not even particularly Unitarian Universalist. He said that we tend to do the process backwards, thinking that inspiring mission statements will make purposeful people, while actually, it’s purpose-filled people who produce inspiring mission statements.

Zalinski quoted Rev. Robert Latham, who said, in a critique of Unitarian Universalists’ lack of any clear identity, that we had substitutes instead of purposes.

Latham said that “The first substitute was community. But simply gathering to have compatible fellowship did not satisfy our need to feel a part of something noble. Moreover, while community is focal in our religious movement, it can also easily be nothing more than an embracing haven for frustrated liberals.

“The second substitute was social action. But this did not have an appeal to everyone in our movement. Moreover, while social action is an imperative for us, it can also be nothing more than an activity that temporarily relieves the guilt of theological irrelevance.

And finally, “The third substitute was political correctness. But it, somehow, seemed to lack depth as a reason for being. Moreover, while being politically correct is often consistent with the values of our movement, it can also be nothing more than a tactic that ignores experience and wisdom in favor of social posturing.”

Zalinski pointed out that church is not a social service agency, a political action agency, a social support club, a place for group therapy, or a family. This struck me a little closely, because I had received such meaningful acceptance and support from my church when I needed it. But the point he was making was not that these things might take place, they didn’t constitute what church was for.

He made the shocking allegation that the purpose of church is not negotiable, that it is already in place – anthropologically, historically, and legally.

Churches are 501(c)(3) tax-exempt corporations because of what they do for society. And that the purpose of church in America is to shape society's values. The old-fashioned name for this is teaching morality. Churches are expected to somehow give shape to society, replace chaos, and provide the means through which we can assert ourselves in the shaping of community through the expression of the personal belief that there is a way that works best for us as humans and that we should figure out how to do that.

Zalinski then went on to point out that, if we're going to influence someone and change their behavior, it doesn't happen by how we talk to them, or explain ourselves, although that may be part of it. Changes in values always come through changes in hearts. And that brings us back to love. He said that the purpose of our churches is to shape the world into our image of love.

Although this may sound shockingly radical, we've actually been doing this for centuries. We've been involved in changing America's heart concerning slavery, women's right to vote, humane treatment of the mentally ill, humane treatment of war wounded, animal rights, depression era safety net, civil rights, anti-war movement, environmental protection, LGBTQ rights, immigration rights, and responding to Christian fundamentalism.

He was rather modest in his goal: the job of our churches is to teach the world how to love. Many other religions are out there shaping the world according to their values and image of how it ought to be, he said, and if this isn't our purpose, we are out of the religion game. We are something else instead.

Now, our image of love may include a variety of definitions – not necessarily a single script. We seek and share the wisdom of our hearts and the revelations we get about love. And, yes, folks – this means evangelism. But, think: who among us would deny that they wish the world was different and that they wish that their church, their personal life, might have something to do with making that difference?

When we read the words of Unitarian pioneer, Frances David, that “We need not think alike to love alike,” we tend to stop paying attention after the first five words. Not thinking alike is something we're generally willing to accept, or at least willing to entertain. But the idea that we should love alike is revolutionary.

It points again to the fundamental purpose of doing church: to provide a community where people can feel safe, loved and cared about; a place where people are committed to loving one another in thought, word, and deed; a community committed to shaping the world according to its image of love; a community committed to completing the evolutionary journey from greed and fear to love and compassion, and to shine its light so that our society and the world will feel called to do the same.

How would this be possible? Based on the way most Unitarian Universalist congregations work, it is not possible. Mired in political processes of administration, management, and maintenance, our energies are all spent on survival rather than uplift and fulfillment in love.

The only way it would be possible to be a community dedicated to the challenge of love – within our walls and beyond – is to honor our heritage as a covenantal faith.

We all know that ours is a non-creedal faith. There is no one set of beliefs we must have to be a member. That's David's "We need not think alike" part. But the other half, loving alike, requires something else of us.

With no creed, we need a covenant. Our congregations are made up of the promises we make and keep to one another. Without a covenant, we can't even shape our congregation, much less the world. The Rev. Alice Blair Wesley told us how this works for Unitarian Universalists. We need to promise each other to make love our highest priority. We need to hold ourselves accountable to that promise, and we need to accept that humans are also promise-breaking creatures. We need to promise to remain in loving community when promises are broken; to work together to begin again in love.

She says that, "Ultimately, the only freedom adequate for human dignity is the freedom to do what love asks of us. And the greatest blessings of life come to us and through us to all the world when, with intimate and freely bonded companions, we are trying together to live with the integrity of faithful love."

From this point of view, free religion isn't quite as free as some might imagine. It's not free because we all get to believe what we want. It's free because

each congregation chooses how to go about shaping the world in our image of love, by engaging in the holy conversation about how love shapes the world.

This is what church is for. Other churches are accepting this mission and promoting a world based on images of love that are radically different from ours. Being a church means taking up the challenge; doing the hard work of learning how to make a place where people feel safe and loved, like I did at the Community Church more than 20 years ago. Being a church means making a commitment to a loving vision of beloved community that calls its members to do the most challenging and inspiring work there is: transforming the world.

This is what church is for. It is love calling to the world with a message and a mission of transforming love. I invite you to answer the call.