Unison Affirmation

Unto the Church Universal,
Which is the depository of all ancient wisdom,
And the school of all modern thought;
Which recognizes in all prophets a harmony,
In all scriptures a unity,
And through all dispensations
A continuity;
Which abjures all that separates and divides,
And always magnifies humanity and peace:
Which seeks truth in freedom,
Justice in love,
And individual discipline in social duty;
And which shall make of all persons, sects,
Classes,
Nations, and races,
One Beloved Community –
Unto this Church
And unto all its members,
Known and unknown
Throughout the world,
We pledge the allegiance,
Of our hands and hearts.

Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-84), adapted

Readings

On his 25th anniversary with the church in 1932, John Haynes Holmes (1879-1964) reaffirmed:

I would have The Community Church the model of my ideal society. I would see all sorts and conditions . . . in relations one with another of respect and reverence. I would have courtesy and forbearance the habit of its members, kindness their speech, and love their life. When sweet accord prevails among us, I feel light flooding from our hearts into the
world; if discord come, I feel that light grow dim, and leave the world in darkness.

As we seek truth, cherish freedom, exalt justice, and always practice peace, we prove our dreams a reality for… (humanity). Our earth can yet be paradise, since we have made our varied faiths and fates one fellowship.

In 1938, Holmes wrote:

Humanity, for all its endless and tragic divisions into tribes and clans and nations and races, is still “of one blood,” so religion, for all its divisions into churches and cults and denominations and competitive world faiths, is still of one spirit….

All religions are true in the measure of their fidelity to the inner spirit of … (humanity), and all religions false in the measure of their betrayal of this spirit…

"UNTO THE CHURCH UNIVERSAL"
Rev. Bruce Southworth

"Unto the Church Universal… which shall make of all persons, sects, classes, nations and races… one Beloved Community."

In a world of religious fanaticism, multivariate bigotries, binary divisiveness around class or politics, and earth destruction advancing, advancing, advancing….

What? What in the world?

Universal Religion is one avenue toward the Beloved Community…. The Kingdom of God on Earth, as the old religions would say… the Beloved Community to embrace Dr. King’s language about the “World House” in which we live.

Saving Lives

The “Church Universal… which shall make… one Beloved Community”… a place of healing and hope, even life-saving, not only spiritually but also sometimes literally… Life Saving.

I think of a colleague of mine, Nate Walker, who preached at one of the many worship services at last year’s General Assembly meeting of the Unitarian Universalist
Association. He spoke about growing up in the desert areas of Nevada. He spoke about his religious grounding this way:

Although my folks were not religious, they were devotional. Every Sunday we went horseback riding in the Sierra Nevadas. I never explicitly asked them, but always suspected that they were the founders of the equestrian religion. After setting up camp, we would sit around a campfire and tell stories. My mom and brother would pull out their guitars. We'd sing songs. My dad would recite poetry, and we'd sit in silence, and we'd make wishes on falling stars. Surrounded by the beauty of Lake Tahoe, the material, the tangible, the natural became a catalyst for our reflections on the non-material aspects of life.

My colleague also spoke about growing up gay… and how he came out at age 15 when his dad found a letter written to his boyfriend.

His grandmother, out of some deep wisdom, knew an isolated teenager would welcome knowing he was not alone, so she announced that they were going to the not so nearby Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. She figured that would be a safe place for him and others… and that surely there would be some gay members there.

My colleague at age 15 adds that off they went the very next Sunday, and as best he recollects: no gay people. He continues,

what I do remember is that this little fellowship of a dozen people met in a trailer in Reno, Nevada. … and I found something remarkable that day. Community. It was a community of people who renounced fanaticism. They proclaimed reason. They promoted religious freedom, and cultivated humanity.

As part of his story, he reports,

In my nightstand laid a knife, a note, and a calendar. I was counting down the days with the intent to take my own life. Unbeknownst to my grandmother, there were only two days left to the countdown before that fateful Sunday morning. A small group gathered and provided me an oasis from the desert of despair. I was hungry for belonging, and they fed me hospitality. I was thirsty for self-worth, and they offered me a cup of acceptance. I was a stranger and they welcomed me. And together, we knew freedom.

Affirming the Church Universal

This morning, on a day when we have our annual Congregational Meeting, I turn to our Unison Affirmation as a sermonic text – as I have done before – 20 years ago.
Unto the Church Universal... Our Affirmation is in our order of service almost every week.

In my research through the Church archives, those words first appear on September 29, 1929. There is no explanation in the weekly calendar, nor in the sermon delivered that morning by John Haynes Holmes.

The Doxology is the one we still use. But that offering of Thanksgiving came at the very beginning of the service, like an opening hymn. Next came an invocation followed by the Lord's Prayer. However, 82 years ago the order of service had the note for the first time:

"Invocation: (Ending with the following statement spoken in unison."

And there it is: "Unto the Church Universal...."!

Dr. Holmes mentions its use at our Church in his autobiography, but gives no explanation

A few years ago, at the suggestion of a Church member, Alfred Gescheidt who died just a week ago, we print it as you see it now. It is easier to read than in paragraph form.

Twenty years ago, I added the author's name, Keshub Chandra Sen in order to indicate authorship. In 1978, Dr. Harrington degenderized the language and replaced the words “one fellowship of men” .... with “one Beloved Community." (May 21, 1978)

Some of us don't join in speaking it, and that's ok. Some say they come primarily for it. And whether it works for you or not, that affirmation – not a creed – has become for me part of the glue, the identity of who we are and what we aspire to. The words may be rote for some; I understand, but for me they are weighty, inspiring and challenging.

It is a worthy vision.

**Keshub Chandra Sen and the Brahmo Samaj**

The affirmation comes from the writings of Keshub Chandra Sen. Born in 1838, he died in 1884. He was an illustrious Indian religious leader who became a leading member of a group called the Brahmo Samaj. The Brahmo Samaj was a reform movement within Hinduism that arose in 1830 and began the Bengal Renaissance. American and English Unitarians shared with them the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and of the activist Unitarian preacher Theodore Parker, whom they readily embraced.
The Brahmos like other groups were in part a response to Christian missionaries, as well as to a growing nationalist movement. While some groups called for a kind of Protestant Reformation and a “return to the Vedas” to overcome encrusted traditions, others sought to incorporate Christian teachings and Western ideas to create a richer religious tradition. Groups such as the Brahmo Samaj sought an inclusive approach and argued that no one religion has an exclusive, absolute claim on all persons.

Like abolitionist and Transcendentalist Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, Keshub believed religion must include deeds not creeds. Part of his social program called for the elimination of the caste system and poverty and for the education of women. The Brahmos opposed the custom of sati, the burning of widows on the funeral pyre of their deceased husbands. They called for marriage reform and were successful with new national legislation in 1872. It provided for interfaith marriage, elimination of child marriage, remarriage for widows, and inter-caste marriage – issues that were shaking the foundations of rigid orthodoxy, patriarchy and a class stratified society. There was a split within the Brahmos, and at this stage in the 1860s, Keshub Chandra Sen was leading the group that sought to eliminate the Brahmin caste privileges.

The “one-percenter” of those times I imagine…. Our social justice efforts in our times on so many fronts echo the spirit of the Brahmo Samaj.

Unto the Church Universal… Without much fanfare, it appeared in the order of service for the first time here on the last Sunday of September in 1929. This was ten years after our congregation had dropped its name – at that time The Church of the Messiah – and chose something more inclusive. In 1919, we became The Community Church of NY, leaving behind any explicit identity as a Christian congregation and embracing universal religion.

“In all prophets a harmony, in all scriptures a unity and through all dispensations a continuity”
Rev. John Haynes Holmes and Universal Religion

For our congregation, the coming of the Rev. John Haynes Holmes as Minister in 1907 began a decisive shift. He had been educated at Harvard and its Divinity School just a few years after the World Parliament of Religions in 1893. Universalist and Transcendentalist beliefs impressed themselves upon him, as did the Social Gospel movement.

In 1909, Holmes observed, “All the religions of the world, therefore – from the most primitive to the most complex, from the most degraded to the most sublime – are from the standpoint of evolution but different manifestations of the one universal religion…. From this standpoint, all things become divine, all things secular become sacred, all truth becomes revelation…."

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I think it is in this evolutionary sense that we can affirm a Universalism that “recognizes in all prophets a harmony, in all scriptures a unity and through all dispensations a continuity” as “different manifestations of one [still imperfect, but ever-evolving] universal religion.

“The depository of all ancient wisdom”

And let’s back up: “Unto the Church Universal which is the depository of all ancient wisdom….” We draw from wonderful ancient traditions across the globe:

Judaism’s book of Leviticus: *Love your neighbor as yourself.*
Christianity Letter to the Corinthians: *Faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love.*
Islam’s words of Mohammad: *Kindness is a mark of faith and whoever has not kindness has no faith.*
African teaching: *It takes a village to raise a child.*
Buddhism’s invocation of compassion and mindfulness.
Taoism’s invitation into *Harmony with Nature and one’s self.*
Native American tradition that embraces an ethic that calls us to *honor those who come after us… unto the 7th generation and beyond.*

“The School of all modern thought”

“Ancient wisdom”… And the “school of all modern thought.”

Like chaos theory!

There is a writer, teacher, preacher by the name of Barbara Brown Taylor, who as a Christian is seeking to understand something about modern science, cosmology, quantum physics, and chaos theory. In an article a few years ago, she reflected upon a workshop she attended to help her get up to speed.

As the beautiful patterns of fractal geometry unfolded out of seeming disorder on a screen before her, and amid the various complexities of her life (that sometimes seemed random and chaotic), she intuited a deeper order within or behind her own struggles. Chaos theory, which is really about the order behind complexity, offers her a symbolic insight and blessing to her own faith. It was so powerful that she calls it a religious experience, understanding disparate parts of her life coming together.

As she ponders quantum physics in which there is a luminous web of interconnection, rather than the old model of isolated individual atoms, she sees her life as defined ineffably and inevitably in terms of relationships. And just as quantum physics has truly weird conclusions, such as what is sometimes called “spooky action at a distance,” non-locality, she feels the underlying unity of all particles, of everything. For her, it is an affirmation of connections, for her the kind one hears about, or knows about,
like the mother who wakes in the middle of the night knowing something has happened to her child.

Underneath and within, for her is a monotheism, an overarching “unbroken wholeness of the universe” that modern science confirms.

She asks core faith questions. “Am I alone?” And answers, “How could I ever be alone? I am part of the web that is pure relationship, with energy available to me that has been around since the universe was born.”

She finds her faith story of monotheism, the primacy of mutuality and right relationships — of Jesus’ teaching and the purpose of the church community — the basics confirmed by modern science, a god of transcendence and immanence, with us and around us. Unlike the Christian literalists, dualists and fundamentalists, she finds liberation in science.

Hers at its core is a cosmic naturalism. One can, as she does, add a Christian flavor. Naturalistic faith (with a process theology of change and transformation, growth and connection, growing our souls) can accept many metaphors, symbols.

I like Jonathan Prykop’s description of us: “The Church Universal must be a place where people can come to have their imaginations enriched by a rainforest of metaphors that speak to the full breadth of human experience.”

Our banners are but one element of that “rainforest of metaphors.”

By the way, Google “Unto the Church Universal” and up comes at the top today’s newsletter. And a few matches down is “Ask How. Com” with our listing!

“Abjures all the separates and divides”

“Unto the Church Universal… which abjures all that separates and divides”. How do we do that as a spiritual discipline? As I have mentioned before, one way to look at that is to affirm creative, healthy communication as UU theologian Henry Nelson Wieman did.

He noted that deceptive, manipulative and muddle-headed communication — yes, careless, muddle-headed communication — destroys community. It separates and divides.

“Creative interchange” is the goal: communication that heals, connects, restores, saves, and helps build the Beloved Community.
“Magnifies humanity and peace”

The Church Universal “magnifies humanity and peace.” Yes, there are different strategies politically about peace-making. We are not creedal, and thus not a “pacifist” community in the way that the Quakers are, even though we have often been in common cause with the peace-making religious traditions.

“Truth in Freedom”

The Church Universal seeks “truth in freedom”, and I remind you of the words of William Ellery Channing, who spoke at the dedication of our first building in 1826. Channing helped define Unitarian faith in those decades and gave us the “Principle of the Free Mind” – that we are called to think for ourselves…. We have that freedom and imperative.

A modern update is Flannery O’Conner’s observation, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you…. Odd,” as well as free. We gather in precious freedom encouraged to think for ourselves, and to do so with respect for each other, and a loving spirit.

“Justice in love”

Gandhi, to whom our pulpit is dedicated, reminds us, as does our affirmation, “to seek justice in love.” In his struggles with the colonial empire of Great Britain, in his political struggles for Indian independence, he counseled spiritual wisdom – always to respect your adversary – not to back others into corners… to be generous of heart in the midst of militant non-violence.

“Individual discipline in social duty”

What about the next line? “Individual discipline in social duty?” Another way to say that from our tradition is to affirm “Deeds not creeds.” Human health and holiness and wholeness expand by our actions…. Words alone cannot suffice.

We know that we are interconnected with all persons and all things. And we have obligations to one another, despite our sometimes overly touted individualism.

“All persons, sects, classes, nations, and races”

The Church Universal “shall make of all persons, sects, classes, Nations, and races, One Beloved Community”. Carl Sandburg, poet, historian, and Lincoln scholar was once asked by a journalist what the ugliest word in the English language was. Sandburg responded, “The ugliest word in the English language is exclusive.”
“Known and unknown throughout the world.”

And whom shall we welcome as part of the vision of the Beloved Community? The “Known and unknown throughout the world.” All seekers, all persons who participate in the ongoing revelations in nature and human spirit.

“We pledge the allegiance, Of our hands and hearts.”

And then what, beyond the vision and welcome? “We pledge the allegiance, Of our hands and hearts.”

We live our commitments. We plant seeds of community, love, reason, justice, and freedom.

A story about someone’s dream, as reported once upon a time:

“A woman dreamed she walked into a brand new shop in the marketplace, and to her surprise, found God behind the counter. “What do you sell here?” she asked.

“Everything your heart desires,” said God.

Hardly daring to believe what she was hearing, the woman decided to ask for the best things a human being could wish for. “I want peace of mind, and love, and happiness, and wisdom, and freedom from fear,” she said. Then just as quickly added, “Not just for me. For everyone on earth.”

God smiled, “I think you’ve got me wrong, my dear,” God said. “We don’t sell fruit here, only seeds.”

As we do that, planting seeds of love and justice, as we embrace the Church Universal and Universal Religion and build the Beloved Community, we change the world… and save lives. My colleague Reverend Nate Walker reported to those gathered, when he was speaking about his entry into our faith with that tiny group meeting in a trailer in Reno, Nevada:

And it was so simple. We would reflect upon our lives, and sing songs, and just be together. It was in that moment that something remarkable happened. These simple exchanges of humanity, those simple exchanges created wonder. And I wonder if this small group of people felt like they were planting seeds in a drought-stricken land. Little did they know what they would reap, how the very act of planting this Fellowship saved my life. Literally.


iii http://revjack.com/jack/churchuniversal.html