

**What We Worship:**  
**A Study of Religious Liberals and the Sacred**  
**Big Sky Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**Worship Service presented by Bill Kronholm**  
**October 18, 2009**

Joyce and I are just back from a two-week trip to the Southwest. We had some good times. We camped and hiked in the canyon country of Utah, and explored Anasazi ruins at Chaco Canyon in New Mexico. We were on the field for the first mass ascent of this year's hot-air balloon festival in Albuquerque. That is a breathtaking sight, for anyone who hasn't seen it. And while we were in Albuquerque, we also attended the First Unitarian Church there.

Now, First Unitarian is one of the big guys of Unitarian Universalism. It has 750 members and two full-time ministers plus a ministerial intern. It holds four – count them, four – Sunday services each week, not counting the services held in three branch congregations that it sponsors in outlying communities.

On this particular Sunday, though, First Unitarian had a lay speaker – one of its members, Kevin LaPoint, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of New Mexico who based his sociology dissertation on a four-year study of the strengths and weaknesses of liberal religion. That is the study I want to share with you today. Much of his sermon that day was couched in the first person and referred to First Unitarian and its members. I've adapted it for our use today, and localized parts of it for Big Sky UU, but it is entirely based on Kevin's research.

Like many Unitarian Universalists, Kevin LaPoint left a more conservative church where he came to feel increasingly uncomfortable and unwelcome. He found UU, where he didn't have to swear belief in any statement of theological beliefs, where there were no traditional religious moral codes, where he and others could define God in their own way and find people who would delight in their creativity, not scold them for their heresy -- where he

could simply be himself.

In some ways, he said, encountering Unitarian Universalism for the first time was life changing. And if asked, I know that several of you would recall similar experiences when you too were—if you'll excuse the phrase—"born again" in religious liberalism.

Kevin's research was conducted at three Albuquerque churches that identified and promoted themselves as liberal or progressive. These included a radically inclusive Episcopal parish and a United Church of Christ congregation, as well as First Unitarian. He gathered data by observing and participating in a wide range of activities in each of these churches over a four-year period, and by interviewing their ministers, their lay leaders, and a number of new members.

The three churches were all welcoming and inclusive, indicated by their support for women in ministerial roles and official outreach to gay and lesbian participants. All of the religious liberals were critical of fundamentalism. And all three emphasized individual freedom and member diversity over group conformity or traditional religious authority.

He said he began his study out of concern about the future of religious liberalism in America. For the reality is that most liberal and mainline Protestant denominations across the country that try to be inclusive are struggling to survive.

These religious institutions have experienced a sharp decline in participants and social influence over the past six decades. And the downward trend is continuing, though at a somewhat slower rate in recent years.

Surprisingly, our own denomination halted its member decline around 1982 and has actually grown slightly since then; we're one of the few liberal religious groups to so.

And yet, a third of all UU churches nationwide continue to shrink each year, and most do not grow at all. Our fellowship here in Helena is an exception; we have grown substantially

over the past few years. But from a national perspective, the growth that is occurring in our denomination is driven by only about 20 large, successful congregations—including Albuquerque's First Unitarian.

So the situation is frustrating. Especially since public opinion surveys indicate that among the ever-growing number of Americans who claim no church or religious identity whatsoever, most share the sort of liberal values and social attitudes that inclusive congregations like ours celebrate.

Why aren't more of them here? And why do many of those who do visit liberal churches and agree with the principles promoted in those settings apparently lose interest over time and eventually stop attending?

Most social theorists have concluded that liberal churches are simply and inevitably "weak" institutions because they ask so little from participants. Churchgoers who don't fear hell and feel no social or "divine" pressure to stay involved in their religious communities find it quite easy to drop out, and often do. Undoubtedly, this even includes some who were initially enthusiastic about finding a place where they could "just be themselves."

One UU member interviewed at First Unitarian summed up this tendency among religious liberals by saying: "I heard that you go from Lutheran to Methodist to Unitarian to the golf course."

So why is it that some of us choose to stay involved in organized religion? What keeps us inspired over time, draws us back here regularly for Sunday services and other church activities during the week? And perhaps most important, why do some liberal faith communities continue to grow and thrive, defying the patterns of decline that most other liberal churches face?

Kevin said his research discovered three major findings:

**First**, people who attend liberal churches do so for the same basic reason that conservative believers are active in their faith communities.

Now you may be surprised by that statement. But from a sociological perspective, all types of churchgoers have a similar desire to celebrate, be inspired by, and, yes, worship their core ideals with others.

We come to church and stay involved over time because we encounter something rare and precious here that gives us the strength to return to our everyday lives with greater hope and confidence.

Here, in this special place, this faith community, we feel connected to others who share our deepest values and encourage us to believe that our life—and all of life—is somehow mysteriously valuable.

Sociologists refer to such emotionally evocative, life-affirming moments as “sacred” experiences because they are so distinct from our everyday activities, and because they seem to validate our very existence. We are stronger people because we participate here. Ultimately, these sacred encounters are what make a congregation special and unique for us. And without them, we wouldn’t continue attending.

Many of those interviewed at the three churches described how their relationships with specific people in their congregations were what they most enjoyed. For them, these social interactions were what they experienced as sacred.

Some attended with their spouses or partners, or with their children, and Sunday services were thought of as providing “quality time” for their families. Others enjoyed the opportunity to meet new friends who shared their values, interests, and hobbies, or who wanted to work together on community service projects or social activism. These social connections created bonds for many people, making their church involvement a worthwhile

experience.

But social researchers have consistently found that churches characterized exclusively by such close-knit relationships often have trouble growing. Not only can cliques develop that can make visitors feel unwelcome, but people who attend church only because they enjoy a few close relationships there have a tendency to drop out when those relationships are disrupted or end.

So people leave when their spouse or partner dies, or there's a divorce, or children grow up and stop attending, or friends in the congregation move away, or conflicts arise between them and other members.

So even though social ties are sacred experiences for many people, liberal churches that rely on these alone are often weak and unstable institutions.

The **second** research finding was that the thriving liberal churches in the study were each described by their participants as being more than just social clubs or political organizations.

Instead, people emphasized the importance of spirituality in their congregations, and what they said was the ability to worship with others. This is significant because religious liberals in the U.S. often have a tough time creating sacred experiences around group worship. This is perhaps because Christianity has served as the sole basis for what most Americans think of as "religion."

All of the liberal and mainline denominations are rooted in Christianity—a style of faith that was historically expressed through orthodox creeds and exclusive moral codes that defined people as good or bad, saved or damned, in or out. And so for religious liberals, rejecting that form of Christianity often results in a growing rejection of "religion" entirely.

This was the case almost two centuries ago when liberal-minded churchgoers in the

United States first began promoting more inclusive ideals in their congregations by minimizing Christian traditions they found divisive, offensive, or simply irrelevant. In time, though, so much was eliminated that some groups began to lose the ability to create worship experiences around anything at all.

Nowhere was this process more extensive than among Unitarians and Universalists. By the time these two groups merged in 1961 to become our present denomination, many local congregations had eliminated so many Christian elements of worship—without replacing them with alternatives—that they lacked almost any sign of “spirituality.” No times of silence or contemplation. No rituals. No candles or symbols. No music. Even today, some UU fellowships continue to operate in this manner. And they are all declining in members.

During the study, this was observed slowly taking place at the Congregational church in Albuquerque. Although religious liberals there continued to nominally identify as Christians, few said they found any real meaning or emotional power in their worship routines on Sunday mornings. Their minister also supported the gradual elimination of practices that seemed to conflict with that group’s inclusive values.

With fewer and fewer tools to evoke feelings of worship, those who attended that church did so only because of the individual friendships they enjoyed there. It was therefore not surprising that the majority of UCC congregants complained about a distinctive lack of spirituality in their group experience. One woman at the Congregational church ultimately decided to leave the congregation in search of greater spiritual fulfillment elsewhere. And, interestingly, she ended up at First Unitarian.

Which leads to the **third** and final finding of the study:

Of the three liberal churches studied, the two that were growing and thriving – First Unitarian and the Episcopal parish – did so by reaching out to a wide range of liberal-minded

spiritual seekers and providing them opportunities to build sacred experiences around the ideal of inclusion itself.

Successful liberal churches do not avoid religious practices or rituals, but promote what some people described as liturgy. Drawing from multiple faith traditions—including Christianity—we engage in routines that people can rely upon each week for inspiration. Here in Helena, that includes ritual such as our chalice lighting, our singing of Spirit of Life, our closing circle and singing of Shalom Havayreem, and our moments of reflection and meditation. Successful liberal congregations encourage each of us to reclaim religious traditions and spiritual practices as our own. To explore words and symbols and rituals that work for us, that inspire us, and that we can use to celebrate our ideals and principles.

Success comes to the spiritually oriented community that encourages religious liberals to worship a distinctive vision—to experience in this place a sense that our ideals are of utmost importance – not only because we individually support them, or because they’re promoted by this fellowship or this denomination, but because they are somehow reflected and affirmed within all of life. They are spiritual values, and the diversity within the church and throughout society demonstrate a universal truth about reality – that in life’s diversity, there is some mysterious unity, a sacred mystery.

It’s a way of experiencing Ultimate Reality that many spiritual seekers described. Some people talked about life’s sacred diversity as a living Universe, with a capital U. Others used the terms collective unconscious, great spirit, higher power, nature, energy, or even some alternative conception of “God” derived from mysticism.

Regardless of the names we use, the church constantly encourages us to embrace the variety of sacred experiences in our lives and in the lives of those around us and to glimpse the bigger picture to which this points. Here. In this place. This sacred community of faith.

So, in conclusion, let us emphasize the good news revealed by the research. It is that liberal congregations are not inevitably weak institutions or doomed to failure in the decades ahead.

They can succeed—and some are succeeding – by offering liberal-minded people a range of both social opportunities and unifying spiritual routines. They not only tolerate diversity, but find within diversity a spiritual truth. And it is a truth that is sought by many: A spiritual-basis for inclusion. For interdependency. For unity in diversity.

For this is what we worship here. And many of us—even years after joining this denomination—are still devoted because of the timeless, sacred experiences encountered in this community of faith. Our challenge is to discover and build upon our own progressive style of creating meaningful experiences of worship around the ideals and principles we all share as religious liberals.

Peace be with you. Amen.