

**"We Are the New Pioneers" a sermon on the CUC
Rev. Brian J. Kiely Unitarian Church of Edmonton
January 11, 2004**

When I first walked into a Unitarian church 26 years ago, the idea of becoming part of just that one congregation seemed pretty overwhelming. It never occurred to me to even care that it might be part of some larger national association, or to wonder how that body might work. One roomful of Unitarians that day was quite enough, thanks.

The only person I knew was the one who brought me. The hymns were unfamiliar. The rituals were unfamiliar. The room was unfamiliar. Even the message that morning was unfamiliar to my still Catholic ears. It was enough to think only about getting through the service without drawing attention to myself that morning. So it never occurred to me that I was being a "pioneer".

But in a sense that was exactly what I was doing. The Oxford Canadian Dictionary gives as its first definition of the word, "an initiator of a new enterprise". The day that I sat through my first service, I started something new. To stretch the pioneer image a bit, I turned some spiritual sod and unearthed a new-to-me way of thinking about religion. I didn't even realize it that day. Mostly I had gone to please my girlfriend. I spent my first service trying not to stand out while poking holes in what I heard. I may not have been an active Catholic, but I sure wasn't a Unitarian (yet) and I was going to prove their Protestant wrongheadedness. It would be a year or so of sporadic attendance before I would want to start going to church for me and not for her. But without a doubt something new had begun to grow for me that day.

Growing up, church had mostly been something 'done unto' me. By this I mean services and other events were mostly managed by a few people, either priests or their key volunteers. I only had to go and let it happen. It had never occurred to me that 'participating' in religion could mean more than simply standing and sitting at the appropriate times and reciting the prayers properly.

One of the first things I learned in my early Unitarian days was that 'participation' meant so much more. I don't mean volunteer work, although that's terribly important. I don't even mean financial support although that's important, too. Here I mean participating in the unfolding of the faith itself. The creeds of my childhood had been

fixed 1700 years before and had remained mostly unchanged ever since. But in the Unitarian church, well, there is no creed. There are no fixed, unchanging or set beliefs. This religion does not expect recitation. It expects thought. If there is an expectation, it is that each one of us who chooses this path will become the creators the next iteration of Unitarian Universalism itself. We are expected to be the pioneers, the initiators of whatever will come next in our evolving religious tradition.

There is a school of theology that speaks to this idea of the ever-unfolding faith. It's called Process Theology. Essentially it says that when we participate in religious conversation or dialogue we become part of the process of the creation and recreation of that faith. Unitarian theologian Henry Nelson Wieman put it this way: The divine essence is in the cracks. Whenever two persons interact, share ideas, converse with one another, there is more in their shared ideas than in either individual's contribution. He said something new is created in these interactions. The sum is greater than the parts. And that part that is greater is the divine spark. So, Wieman concluded, we are nothing less than co-creators with God. He called this action 'Creative Interchange'.

And if we are involved with creation then we are making something new, turning new ground, walking in a new and untamed wilderness of thought and belief. And that, my friends, is the second Oxford definition of 'pioneer', "a settler in previously unsettled land".

But if that's what we are, then Unitarian Universalists are called to be pioneers of ideas, belief and faith. We must never simply accept without question that which has been handed to us from the past. The ideas that fuelled our religion a century ago worked for that time and place. We do well to study them for there were good things, but often the ideas were best suited to that far distant time and place. If the ideas still have value, they must be made new so that they can fit our church and our world today. After all, we don't live in 1904 anymore.

I can give one good example of that updating in progress right now. When the Unitarian and Universalist churches were founded 500 and 200 years ago respectively, the name "Unitarian" meant belief in a single and unified God. The name "Universalist" referred to the idea that God was too good, too loving and too forgiving to damn any part of his creation to Hell. Thus the early teachers concluded, every person would eventually go to heaven, though some might have to wait until they saw the error of their ways. This doctrine was called

'universal salvation' hence the name. So historically, our name means a unified god and a universal ticket to the afterlife.

But those concepts don't serve us so well, anymore. These are not the religious questions that drive most people who become Unitarian Universalists today. We seem to be more concerned with personal spirituality, freedom of belief and the affirmation of human worth and dignity. Interestingly, these concerns have caused many UU's to informally redefine the meaning of our name.

Some of us now doubt the existence of God, certainly as he is described in the Bible. As one wag phrased it a long time ago, "Unitarians are a people who believe in at most one God." For many others the nature of God is simply not that important. Whether God is a unity or not doesn't bother us so much today. Instead, we seem to be looking increasingly at the notion of 'unity' expressed in our name as a descriptor not of our divinity, but of our community. 'Unitarian' now often refers to 'unity in diversity', meaning that we have many beliefs in this church, but that we come together as seekers finding common ground in our shared set of Principles.

And these days the word 'Universalist' refers less to our salvation and much more to the goal of finding the key religious truths that can unite all religious faiths. We want to take the unity we have found in our diversity and extend it as widely and peacefully and respectfully as we can. At least that's what I think I hear from you and other Unitarian Universalists.

There will be a chance to confirm it. Our UU Principles are now 20 years old, it's time we checked to see if they still speak for us and to us. The Canadian Unitarian Council has created a task force charged with getting as many Canadian Unitarians involved in rethinking our Principles as possible. Task Force members have approached us. Later this Winter I will lead some workshops to revisit and possibly redefine our Principles. Everyone will have an opportunity to recreate the core of our religion. We are called to be the new pioneers of our faith. We are called to involve ourselves in Wieman's 'Creative Interchange'.

While our tradition calls us to be pioneers of an evolving faith, it's also true we are called to be institutional pioneers too. By this I mean developing our own local congregations as well as our regional and national links. But I also refer to having an impact on shaping the institutions of Canadian society. We have a good record there. Look

to our historical figures and you'll find people like Joseph Workman, an early or founding member of both the Montreal and Toronto churches in the 1830's and '40's. He was also the father of modern psychiatry in Canada who introduced the idea of humane treatment for the mentally ill in Canada.

Dr. Emily Stowe was the first female physician licensed in Canada and a tireless worker for women's rights.

Unitarians have led the battle against the death penalty in this country and we have a long history of honouring Gay rights and Gay marriage. Today, you and I inherit a proud tradition of being religious pioneers in Canadian society.

But for a long time we did not spend that institution building energy on ourselves. In our reading Phillip Hewett, retired minister and historian of our Canadian church lamented that we erred by insisting on personal freedom over institutional development. He argues that this stubbornness caused us to miss opportunities to build a national organization that would protect those very freedoms. Well, that resistance has moderated some. We are now, in fact, building our national institution. We are engaged in reshaping the face of our Canadian Unitarian Council.

For those of you who are new, two and a half years ago after long deliberation and negotiation, the CUC gained a great deal of autonomy from the continental body. We have hired new field staff to work with congregations and have developed a team of consultants and networkers to better serve Canadian UU interests.

18 months into the implementation phase and there is far greater participation in denominational activities than ever before. The Canadian Unitarian name has been given a higher media profile across the country and more effective services are being delivered to congregations. Attendance has grown steadily at national and regional conferences and training events. Thanks to the staff and volunteers, the CUC is becoming a stronger presence in our churches.

This congregation has a proud history of supporting the Council. No less than three of our church members have served as President of the CUC since it's founding 40 years ago and I am honoured to serve as Vice-President today. Sara McEwan, who holds dual membership here and at Westwood is now the Director of Regional Services for Western Canada, the new field staff person charged with building networks and

delivering services. There are at least a dozen UCE members involved in various committees, not to mention the many people planning the CUC's annual conference to be held here in Edmonton this coming May. We continue to be pioneers for our faith.

But today I come to all of you individually to ask for your support for a very special CUC program. "Sharing our Faith" is designed to get Unitarians helping other Unitarians. Each year we make an appeal across Canada to raise money to fund grants that will help our congregations grow. The grants aren't large, usually only a few hundred to a few thousand dollars. Their size is limited by the money we collect. These grants are focused on helping congregations grow. We have partially helped fund part-time ministries, assisted small congregations with advertising, underwritten programs teaching growth strategies. It is a good and useful program, but it's dependent on each one of us to make it work.

You see, we are the new pioneers. We will make our faith grow stronger or we will weaken it. The future is in our hands alone. The CUC is growing, developing and breaking new ground. But that's only happening because individual Unitarian Universalists across Canada have said that's the way we should go. And in the pioneering spirit, we have also understood that each one of us must back that decision with whatever kind of support we can give. Each one needs to do what we can to make the enterprise a success. It's up to us.