



Does New Zealand need Unitarianism?

Clay Nelson © 8 July 2018

Does New Zealand need Unitarianism? Well, I suppose it depends on who you ask. When this church opened all the clergy in Auckland were invited to our opening service. None came. The only good thing about that is at least they knew who we were and agreed with the graffiti painted on the outside of the building the night before the service, “This is the house of the Devil.” It is safe to say that they definitely did not think New Zealand needed Unitarianism. Our relationship improved with Christian clergy over the years, but I think that is because most don’t know that for 67 years we have not considered ourselves a Christian denomination, not even a heretical one. I would wager that most have no idea who we are or for what we stand. So, their answer now might be a shrug of the shoulders, there aren’t enough of them to be bothered.

In a way I can’t blame them. When this church was built in 1901 there were enough Unitarians to be worthy of being counted in the census. Throughout NZ there were 468 of us and many, if not most, belonged to this congregation. By 1916 during the First World War Unitarians numbered 1468. This congregation was large enough to field an All-City Champion hockey team. Many of their names are on the plaque of remembrance of WWI veterans under the banner displaying our seven principles. Those who did not return are noted.

While I have not succeeded in navigating Stats NZ’s website to find census data after that census that counted Unitarians I suspect that 1916 was our zenith, numerically, in NZ or at least near it. WWI and the flu pandemic that killed over 5500 in 1918 dampened the enthusiasm for an optimistic and positive view of God and humanity. Eventually our numbers declined to a point of not being noted in the census, included only in the category of “other.” Today, few Unitarians can be found beyond Auckland. There are congregations in Christchurch, Wellington, and Blenheim, but they are all quite small and meet only once or twice a month. Looking more broadly to include Australia, we and Adelaide are the largest congregations, both of similar size. Adelaide is the only other congregation to have a minister. Most other congregations in Oz are small. In fact, there are only 450 identified Unitarians in all of Australia and New Zealand. So, apparently most Kiwis and Aussies would shrug their shoulders with the clergy as to whether or not Unitarianism is needed, knowing little or nothing about it.

Our decline is not unique. In 1900, when the British Unitarians sent us William Jellie to be our first minister, there were over 50,000 Unitarians in the UK. Today there are 3,600 spread thinly over 173 congregations.

There is a bright spot for Unitarianism in the US where the denomination is growing. The Unitarian Universalist Association grew nearly 16% between 2000 and 2008. Sounds good until you realise there are only 586,000 UUs in a population of over 326 million. It is possible in the age of Trump that numbers will continue to grow, for as a denomination it is vigorously resisting his policies that violate all of our principles, but over half of all Unitarians are over 50 years of age and the number of younger members is shrinking. The other demographic of concern is that UU congregations are predominantly white, while people of colour will soon be the majority of Americans. In spite of Unitarianism having

played a significant role in its history, most Americans would join those who shrug their shoulders in New Zealand.

What raised this question for me was a recent study on faith and belief in New Zealand commissioned by the Wilberforce Foundation. After reading it, my first question was does New Zealand need religion at all? According to the report a surprising few think so.

From the founding of New Zealand as a British colony, Pakeha were Christian, generally Anglican, Catholic, Wesleyan or Presbyterian. But a lot has changed. Today only one in three identify with a religious or spiritual belief. Only one in five identify with a spiritual belief but not with any of our founding denominations. In other words, we have become a secular nation with 43% preferring a scientific or rational approach to life. Many of that 43% think religion is a superstition or irrelevant or a crutch for the uneducated. While of those who do identify with a denomination only three in five are active in practising their religion, and only one in nine attend their religious choice regularly. That explains why you can find a parking place in Ponsonby on Sundays.

This study was done on behalf of Christian denominations. What they learned, those of us in the coalface have known for most of my 35 years in ministry. Faith based organisations are in decline. Many books have been written as to why and many a consultant (do I dare say charlatans?) has convinced churches they know how to turn it around. But let me give you a recent experience. A woman I have known and mentored since coming to New Zealand was ordained a priest a week ago at Holy Trinity Cathedral. Rachel and I went. It was a moment of closure for me. I had not been to an Anglican service since coming here as your minister. It was strange for me to receive communion for the first time in four years. It also took me back to 1982 when I was ordained. The vows those to be ordained had to make I could not make now with integrity, especially those accepting the authority of the bishops. The world had moved on... or at least I had.

While the pageantry and ritual meant something to me, I had to give live commentary to Rachel who had not grown up in any religion. Unitarianism is her first true venture into an organised religion. None of the ceremony meant much to her, if anything. She was there because it was important to me and I promised her a nice dinner out afterwards. Unless someone is part of the club, traditional religious worship has become less than transformative. I found it sad for the three being ordained that the cathedral was only a third full, with only a token number of clergy present. For my friend, only a handful from her congregation were present. From that I guess only a handful of kiwis, even those who still identify with a denomination, think religion is all that necessary for New Zealand. It is just part of the culture they grew up with or still feel connected to but would feel hard pressed to explain why.

I fervently don't want this congregation to share their indifference. When younger generations are asked to why they have no interest in religion it is for two primary reasons, according to the Wilberforce report. The first is the perceived homophobia of Christian churches. We actually tick that box. We are still the only denomination that fully accepts, includes and supports the rainbow community. While there are many in Christian denominations that share our views, the denominations themselves have not yet fully taken a stand. Those who don't share our views definitely don't think New Zealand needs Unitarianism.

The second reason the younger generation eschews religion is in not seeing the religious living out their values. What they all too often see is hypocrisy. But Unitarians have often been on the right side of history. Martin Luther King Jr once said the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice. He was summarising prominent Unitarian

minister Theodore Parker who vocally opposed slavery and was part of the underground railroad freeing slaves. Parker remains our touchstone. It is not good enough to say the right things if we do not do the right things, even at our peril.

It was not long ago we were asked as a congregation to give sanctuary to Indian students who were being threatened with deportation because their agents and the private schools that they furnished with students had sent fraudulent documents to Immigration New Zealand. It was not an easy decision for us, but after much lively Unitarian debate we provided sanctuary when no other church would. Eventually it seemed we failed to protect them. They were deported. However, recently the Ombudsman report came out. It said Immigration New Zealand had the legal right to deport the students. But remember it was once legal to have slaves. Determining what is legal is the prerogative of the powerful. The Ombudsman went on to say that Immigration NZ should not presume defects in the character of students without further investigation based on the action of their agents in India. He also encouraged the re-evaluation of over 200 Indian students who may be in violation of their visas. Before the report our giving sanctuary also resulted in the closing of some of the schools that had exploited these students.

It is my hope that eventually all of the students will be allowed to return and have their deportation expunged, for all of them have paid a huge price for standing up to injustice. At the moment, four of them have that possibility. For that I rejoice. I dare say that the students we gave sanctuary and have continued to support and advocate for to the best of our ability would say New Zealand needs Unitarianism.

This is just one of the ways we walk our talk. Immigration New Zealand may not think New Zealand needs Unitarianism but if you are a dyslexic child in Tonga or Samoa, working for less than a living wage, hungry but able to find something to eat outside our doors, standing up for environmental justice, a same-sex couple looking for a church that will marry them, a child in a 1st decile school who now has books in his home, then you might disagree. New Zealand needs Unitarianism.