



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Rebuilding better

Clay Nelson © 24th May 2020

I've been musing on how long-range planning has become nothing more than wondering what might happen next week. Certainly, one vocation that has little future is that of futurist. Wikipedia defines a futurist as someone whose specialty or interest is futurology or the attempt to systematically explore predictions and possibilities about the future and how they can emerge from the present, whether that of human society in particular or of life on Earth in general.

In spite of this new reality, we haven't stopped trying to figure out what our post-pandemic lives might look like. We all want to read the last chapter of a mystery novel before beginning the book, only to find out it hasn't been written yet. As we in New Zealand tiptoe into Level 2, I see a rise in this speculation about the future now that most of us survived the first wave with our health unscathed. With that worry put to the side for now, we can now focus on what remains of the rest of our lives. For almost everyone it looks like a tornado came through town yesterday while we were hunkered down in the storm shelter. Debris is everywhere. The landscape has become unfamiliar.

One of the qualities I admire most about humanity is that after the initial shock and despair dissipates, we get down to the business of cleaning up the mess and rebuilding. Of course, this is where the problems and conflicts begin to arise. There will be those who want to simply restore what previously existed, forgetting that global climate change means there will be a lot more tornados in our future. And there will be those who think living in a trailer park in tornado alley was never a brilliant idea. They see an opportunity to rebuild better. The downside of that approach is it almost necessarily requires letting go of aspects of our lives we loved before the cataclysm.

Those of us in the rebuild better camp share universal concerns. We see an opportunity to implement a fossil fuel-free green economy that creates meaningful work while saving the planet. We see neoliberalism much like that ill-situated trailer park. The invisible hand of the market was second only to Trump as Covid 19's BFF. Contrary to neoliberal tenets that government and unions are worthy only of suppression or even annihilation, they have been essential in uniting us to resist successfully the virus. They are our hope in building a just economy that doesn't see a supermarket worker as both essential and sacrificial.

Beyond universal concerns there are the specific challenges that everyone is facing in their context. We may be relaxing some of the restrictions required in Levels 3 and 4, but good hygiene and cleaning protocols, keeping track of our contacts, maintaining physical distance, not travelling overseas are all restrictions that will remain in place for the indeterminate future. That means every aspect of our lives has to incorporate them for the well-being of all. How and where we work. How and when we commute. How we shop and buy our groceries. How we socialise at a restaurant or bar or in our homes. How we exercise. How we parent. How we teach. How we get medical assistance from our GP. And for me, it is pondering how we maintain our faith community within these parameters.

If you ask Google what other faiths and denominations are thinking about their futures you will quickly learn that Auckland Unitarians are not alone. Easter, Ramadan and "the days of awe" from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur have all been or will be affected. The Unitarian Universalist Association is telling its American congregations not to expect to open their buildings before May 2021. I received a notice this week that our annual General Assembly will be held online, which is cool for night owls as most of it will happen in the middle of the night here.

I have spent considerable time online looking at what future church might look like with us specifically in mind. Most of what I've seen is about how to rebuild in tornado alley, rather than reflecting on new ways of incarnating our kaupapa. How to be our mission.

The reality is that organised believing centred on a particular building has been in decline in New Zealand since the 1960s. More than half of New Zealanders state no religious preference, even though most of them would have 100% agreement with the seven principles that undergird our faith. Yet, that does not motivate them to join our community, which is the last viable outpost for Unitarianism in Aotearoa.

I'm wondering how attractive visiting us on Sundays will be if you have to wait outside to enter the building until the greeter invites you one at a time into our narrow foyer to sanitise your hands and put on a facemask before entering the sanctuary. Don't forget to scan the QR code with your mobile phone's contact tracing app. Hymn books and orders of service will no longer be made available. Once inside, you take a seat that is two metres apart from seats next to you, in front of you and behind you. That means each chair will have a circle with a four metre diameter around it, greatly reducing the number of people who can attend our small sanctuary even after the present 10 people maximum is lifted. During the service there will be no singing unless everyone is wearing a face mask. Passing a hand mic around for discussion and notices will no longer be possible making difficult for the hearing impaired. Morning Tea will be suspended. A children's programme will be difficult in our space to

continue. In many ways our beloved building has become an albatross around our necks. No longer suitable for purpose.

At present the answer to this dystopian vision has been a church without walls thanks to Zoom. It has allowed us to stay connected. Average attendance has increased over in person worship pre-Covid. Our reach has expanded from Florida to Queensland and from Dunedin to Whangarei. The downside is the limit to how long we can stretch our resources to continue. Keeping our doors shut costs much the same as keeping them open, yet the financial resources to do so have been greatly reduced. No Sunday collection, lower pledge giving, lost renters' income, cancelled fundraisers like the Services Auction are forcing us to rely on reserves which are limited. We have to think about new models for supporting our mission while there is still time.

Big challenges, I know. Difficult decisions ahead, yep. But this is not a time for despair. It is a time for a level of creativity only a community can generate. It is a time to be confident that New Zealand needs perhaps more than ever our Unitarian values. It is a time for faith. It is a time to rebuild better together. Like in beating the virus, everyone will be needed.