



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

# Cornucopia

Rachel Mackintosh, Betsy Marshall © 24 September 2023

## Beginnings

**Betsy:** In early 2014, our Unitarian community was coming to terms with the fact that after only eight months, due to visa issues, we'd lost the American minister we'd contracted for two years. Fortunately the Ministerial Search Committee wasted no time in resurrecting itself to identify what we might do to support our Church's dual strategy of working towards a full-time ministry and strengthening lay leadership.

Finding a minister who met all of our contract expectations was a tall order. These included someone who would provide spiritual leadership through 3-4 Sunday services per month; deliver or facilitate religious education for both adults and children; provide pastoral care, establish community outreach, foster social action; ensure music was an integral part of our Sunday services; and, participate in denominational affairs and meetings of church committees.

The required attributes and skills for the position included a Master of Divinity degree; a clear vision for the Church and the community; a deep understanding of a Unitarian Universalist Church's role in community engagement; a knowledge of the history, culture, stories of the Unitarian faith, its strengths and challenges; and experience in training and developing lay leaders. And, please, please – no visa issues!

We knew our expectations were unachievable. And yet, as if by some miracle, the Reverend Clay Nelson, who met all of these criteria and more, expressed an interest in the position. What's more, because of Clay's credentials, we were able to secure funding from both the Macky and Newland trusts to offer him a position.

**Rachel:** Clay stamped his mark at the very beginning of his time here by setting a condition of his coming to serve as minister: that Auckland Unitarians become a member of the Living Wage Movement, and also

become a Living Wage employer. This apparently mild-mannered cleric very clearly knows his mind. He leads, not with loud trumpeting, but quietly, working among people. And yet, when it matters, he knows how to put his foot down.

There is a story that Clay tells about a couple who came to him to let him know that, some time earlier, he had saved their marriage. He had done so unwittingly through the words of a sermon he delivered. Clay asked them what it was that he had said that had been so helpful ... what they relayed to him was not something he had said, or would ever say ... and yet it was what they had heard ...

The same thing has no doubt occurred many times over. We called this talk cornucopia because of the abundance we have enjoyed through Clay's ministry here. Clay has often enjoined us to open our hearts. Abundance has flowed.

## Challenges

However, in doing some research for today, I came upon a sermon Clay gave on abundance which contains a warning about thinking that we can simply adjust our attitude and that all will come right. In that sermon, we heard – or could have heard – that we need economic literacy as much as we need to open our hearts. There are structural political realities that require us to be active and to build a powerful, not just a beloved, community to contribute to justice in the world.

Clay hasn't always told us – in fact often has not told us – things we expected to hear.

**Betsy:** In February 2017, Clay was approached by a group of Indian students seeking sanctuary in the Church. The students were facing deportation due to fraudulent documents their agents submitted without their knowledge.

It's fair to say that initially, some members, including myself, were uneasy about what we as a Church were being asked to do. However, as Clay pointed out to us all, we as Unitarians could not decline the students' request. As he stated in a press release at the time, "Supporting justice and fair play is in the DNA of Unitarians. This situation requires a response from us. It is clear that these students are

being subjected to a harsh penalty due to the actions of others and not their own. We implore the government to intercede on their behalf. It is the right thing to do.”

**Rachel:** Part of what was worrying some of our community about the Indian students was a niggling question: were they guilty? – had they really been complicit and committed immigration fraud? Clay let us know that this is the wrong question. Giving sanctuary does not involve judgment. The only thing for us to discern was that the students were vulnerable, needed help, and that we were in a position to give it.

## Hard times

– lockdown

**Betsy:** The shock announcement by our prime minister that we would have to isolate in our homes to prevent the spread of Covid had a profound effect on us all. While many of us assumed that closing the church meant an end to Sunday services, Clay’s focus was on ensuring services could continue via Zoom.

Even when the level of restrictions enabled some of us to return to church, there was a need for innovation. Such was his concern for maintaining a beloved community and recognising the isolation of those who, because of health issues, could not return to church, Clay conducted two services – one in the church that was live-streamed and then another that he did on Zoom – racing from the pulpit to his office to accommodate both. And today, thanks to Zoom, our community extends beyond our building and, in fact, beyond New Zealand.

## Flowering

Throughout Clay’s nine-year ministry he delivered roughly 300 sermons, or what he called random musings. Not one of these was a repeat or rehash. And clearly none were random, with all highly relevant to issues of the day.

As someone who has struggled with my Christian doctrinal roots, I have been liberated by Clay’s musings about Christmas. In his address to

ANZUUA, for example, he reminded us that Christmas is a time “to honour our admiration for the just and compassionate world Jesus hoped we would create, without worrying about who he was, but more about who we are and how we treat one another, especially the unfortunate”.

When it came to Easter, Clay rose to the challenge of making it meaningful for us as Unitarians. His challenge, and I quote, “was not to convince us that the resurrection happened, but that resurrection happens. I want you to get Easter, because I care about you. Getting Easter will only enhance your life. You don’t have to be Christian to benefit.”

Clay also offered a range of adult RE programmes, topics for which were based on feedback from our community. As Clay knows, my personal favourite was “Saving Jesus from Christianity”. “An Introduction to Islam” also had a strong following, including attendees from outside the church. Another was “Facing Death with Life”. More recently Clay offered the “Rescuing the Bible” course because, in his words, he found UUs “woefully ignorant about a foundational document of western civilisation” and because “he wanted UUs to be prepared to be able to discern its misuse by some Christians historically and in the present culture wars”.

As illustrated by some of the slides you’ve just seen, Clay also introduced into our services “A Time for All Ages”. This became so integral to our services that even when we had no children on a Sunday morning, we made it clear to Clay that the child within us still needed it.

## **Rebirth**

Who of us could have imagined that music would once again become such a glorious and uplifting part of our services thanks to Clay. Not only did he find for us talented pianists for Sunday services but - can we really believe it – a completely refurbished organ. Those of us responsible for the wording of the initial ministerial contract never in a million years would have expected to have a minister who had substantial experience in organ refurbishment. That experience meant he also knew how incredibly time-consuming the process would be for him. And that doesn’t include the very sensitive and time-consuming

negotiations he had with the anonymous donor who generously provided funding, the donor's lawyer and the South Island Organ Company.

We never expected, too, to have a minister who understood the critical importance of technology of a high standard and who, as a result, provided leadership in the funding and installation of an excellent sound system as well as live-streaming capability. I can assure you this, too, was not in the list of ministerial expectations.

Clay's retirement is the first time in my time in the church that a minister departing has not created panic in the community. Because Clay has done so much to strengthen lay leadership, we move forward on our pathway with many hands to see us through our transition until we are able to engage a paid minister again.

**Rachel:** The story of the cornucopia – the horn of plenty – has many versions. Here is one: When Zeus was a baby, he accidentally broke off the horn of the goat who was nursing him. Thenceforth the horn had the divine power to provide unending nourishment.

Clay, your ministry has been abundant. It is now up to the rest of us to build on the foundations you have laid to provide unending nourishment, spiritual, pastoral, intellectual and practical, to our beloved community.

Amen

### **Meditation / Discussion question**

What influence has this community, and/or in particular Clay's ministry, had on you?

AND/OR

What are you seeking in community?