



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Finding your Home in the Church Community

Peter Lineham © 1 October 2023

I was very struck by an article in the Washington Post on 21 August of this year by Perry Bacon jnr.

THE OPINIONS ESSAY Opinion: I left the church — and now long for a ‘church for the nones’

I’m currently a “none” or, more precisely, a “nothing in particular.” But I want to be a something. “None” is the term that social scientists use to describe Americans who say they don’t belong to or practice a particular religious faith. This bloc has grown from around 5 percent of Americans in the early 1990s to nearly 30 percent today. Most nones aren’t atheists, but what researchers call “nothing in particulars,” people who aren’t quite sure what they believe.

The majority of nones once identified themselves as Christians. And **I couldn’t ignore how the word Christian was becoming a synonym for rabidly pro-Trump White people who argued that his and their meanness and intolerance were somehow justified and in some ways required to defend our faith.** What’s kept me away is having a child. If I were childless, I think I would join a church to be a part of its community, and I would ignore the theological elements I’m not sure about. But my 3-year-old is getting more inquisitive every day. I don’t want to take her to a place that has a specific view of the world as well as answers to the big questions and then have to explain to Charlotte that some people agree with all of the church’s ideas, Dad agrees with only some, and many other people don’t agree with any. **People have told me to become a Unitarian Universalist. Unitarian churches that I have attended had overwhelmingly White and elderly congregations and lacked the wide range of activities for adults and kids found at the Christian congregations that I was a part of.** But they have a set of core beliefs that are aligned with more left-leaning people (“justice, equity and compassion in human relations,” for example) without a firm theology. I’ve also thought about **starting some kind of weekly Sunday morning gathering of nones**, to follow in my father’s footsteps in a certain way, or trying to convince my friends to collectively attend one of the Unitarian churches in town and make it younger and more racially diverse. My upbringing makes me particularly inclined to see a church-sized hole in American life. But as a middle-aged American in the middle of the country, I don’t think that hole is just in my imagination. **Kids need places to learn values like forgiveness, while schools focus on math and reading. Young adults need places to meet a potential spouse. Adults with children need places to meet with other parents and some free babysitting on weekends. Retirees need places to build new relationships, as their friends and spouses pass away. Our society needs places that integrate people across class and racial lines.** Newly woke Americans need places to get practical, weekly advice about how to live out the inclusive, anti-racist values that they committed to during the Trump years. The anti-Trump majority in the United States needs institutions that are separate from the official Democratic Party, which is unsurprisingly more focused on winning elections than in creating a sense of community for left-leaning people. I can easily imagine a “church for the nones.” (It would need a more appealing name.) Start the service with songs with positive messages. Have children do a

reading to the entire congregation and then go to a separate kids' service. Reserve time when church members can tell the congregation about their highs and lows from the previous week. Listen as the pastor gives a sermon on tolerance or some other universal value, while briefly touching on whatever issues are in the news that week. A few more songs. The end. An occasional post-church brunch. During the week, there would be activities, particularly ones in which parents can take their kids and civic-minded members can volunteer for good causes in the community. I don't expect the church of the nones to emerge. It's not clear who would start it, fund it or decide its beliefs. But it should. And personally, I really, really want it to. **Theologically, I'm comfortable being a none. But socially, I feel a bit lost.** I really hope in a few years that Charlotte and I are something in particular.¹

Some of this lined up with the research that I have been involved with in an ecumenical team. We are still under way with the Church Life Survey – I don't see that you have taken part, and maybe it is just a bit too Christian for you – but maybe not! But it has been completed by just short of 20,000 people so far in a vast range of churches from Catholic to Salvation Army. Anyway a key final question in the survey was "In your opinion, which of the following should be given priority in the next 12 months?" People were allowed to choose up to three options. Fourth most popular was "Encourage People to Discover & Use Gifts". Third most popular was "Worship Services Nurturing Faith". Second most popular was "spiritual growth". But easily the most popular choice, across almost all churches was "Build a strong sense of community in the local church". That was really striking.

Now let me remark that the sense of transcendence and the sense of being a spiritual being are important and for me are deeply renewing. But there is the other side in the search for community. Why did I go to the breakfast at All Saints and the morning tea at PBC before coming here.

So my key theme is the desire to connect, to be part of community, and to belong to something. There are lots of reasons why people are feeling the need for this. why this has gone down. (including urban society, frantic pace of life, concerns about catching colds or covid in church among the elderly,) In the survey, although most people said that "I have found it easy to make friends within this local church", 18% were neutral and 5.4% had not found that to be the case, and that proportion rose to 26% neutral and 7% negative in the Catholic Church. Moreover another question asked about the sense of belonging, and there was striking evidence that up to 20% had a low or declining sense of belonging to their church – and that often included older folk and younger folk (not so much the middle aged).

Secondly the desire to affirm that there are more important things in life than the material goods and well-being. [But perhaps they have first priority and we are struggling with this. To me there is a theological theme in this, a theme that when we recognise that God accepts us and welcomes us to the divine table then here there is full community with people very different from ourselves.

Decline in church attendance [regularity has gone down – covid had an effect.] And yet some churches have benefitted from Covid. Ponsonby Baptist church, a fairly unique Baptist church which welcomes LGBT people has significantly increased since Covid. The employment of a youth pastor has greatly helped too.

Aging of membership – average age in the church survey was 60, and about ten years older in Anglican, Presbyterian and Methodist churches.

¹ *Washington Post*, 21/8/2023 columnist: Perry Bacon [Opinion | I used to be a Christian. Now I miss church. - The Washington Post](#)

Limited welcome for children. Few of them, and little provision for them.

Movement between churches – people are leaving for various reasons. Covid unsettled many people.

But in each case recent trends have undermined belonging, often as churches have been more conservative than the beliefs and values of their members. So the question is whether Unitarians can benefit from these trends or are they undermining the church.

I found some help in understanding your situation from an essay on the “Pray with your feet” website by John Halstead.²

Pray with your feet website essay by John Halstead addressed to Unitarian Universalists.

... Many, and maybe most, Unitarians are refugees from other, more conservative religions. We fled the dogmatism and intolerance of those religions, and we found a religious home in Unitarian Universalism. Meanwhile, general societal attitudes have been shifting in our direction for some time At the same time, interest in spirituality is actually growing. So it's natural that we would expect that other people would want to come to a church where they aren't told what to believe and where they are encouraged in their individual spiritual journeys.

But the fact is that most people don't want that. Attendance rates in liberal or liberalizing denominations have been declining for decades, while membership in conservative denominations has grown. The explanation is unavoidable: **Most people prefer the security of the certain to the camaraderie of the questioning, even if that certainty is illusory.**

But what about the growing number of “spiritual but not religious” people? Most of them have discovered that **they don't need a church to be spiritual.** Unitarian Universalism offers a community where people can believe what they want and seek spirituality on their own terms. But most people don't need a church for that. They have the internet. They have yoga. They have Oprah. They have myriad other ways to be spiritual that don't involve going to church.

What's more, **the Unitarian church comes encumbered by many of the trappings of the dogmatic religions which the spiritual-but-not-religious rejected: steeples and bells, pews and pulpits, organs and 19th century dirge-like hymns, and well ... ministers.** If Unitarian Universalism rejects most of the substance of dogmatic religion, we have kept many of its forms. At worst, these are uncomfortable reminders of a painful past for many people. At best, they are unnecessary accoutrements.

It seems paradoxical, but as a general rule, **the more a religion demands of its members, the more committed the members will be to the religion.** Consider the fact that church participation is highest among some of the most demanding religions in America—Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, and Evangelical Protestants—while Mainline Protestants and Catholics get only a fraction of the level of participation.

... if we want to understand why our congregation does not grow, we need to look, not to those things that make our congregation unique, but to those things that we have in common with other UU congregations.

² “Why we're not growing” by John Halstead, [Why We Aren't Growing: An Open Letter to My Unitarian Congregation | Pray With Your Feet](#) 23 January 2019.

Our Unitarian church ... plays a unique role in many people's spiritual journeys. Because we are a non-creedal and welcoming religion, we serve as a spiritual way station for many people, a soft place to land after a bad experience with conservative religion, a way of dipping one's toes into religion after years of religious disengagement, or just a stepping stone on the way to another religious home. And maybe that's not something we should regret. Maybe it is our unique service to the world.

Well that is one argument. But on the other hand, there is some evidence to the contrary. Ponsonby Baptist church and St Luke's Presbyterian church in Remuera are both thriving. St Matthew's in the City is doing pretty well too. Actually the biggest struggles are faced by the middle of the road churches. And I notice more churches shifting their values as young people demand it.

You will need to reflect values that they yearn for. You may be surprised how many new migrants are feeling this particularly. In Auckland roughly a half of all church goers are new migrants. You will need to be multi-cultural as well as communal and welcoming.

And I come back to that initial argument. People are hungry for community, even if they struggle to find the energy to put much into it. I think you owe it to them to be there for them.

Meditation / Discussion Questions:-

How strong is the Unitarian sense of community compared to in the past?

How open would the Unitarian community appear to newcomers?