



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Roots hold me close, wings set me free

Rachel Mackintosh, Betsy Marshall © 14 April 2024

Unitarians are a mixed metaphor. Roots from flora, wings from fauna.

There is no exact Greek mythical creature to represent this idea but perhaps we can think of a dryad or tree-nymph, maybe combined with a phoenix, the bird who rises.

We are a mixed metaphor and a mixed faith, one that values pluralism and whose hymn book is called *Singing the Living Tradition*.



The shared values we spent several services exploring under Clay's leadership last year are expected to be given official status at the 2024 general assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association. They are represented in a flower with love at the centre and one petal each for interdependence, equity, transformation, pluralism, generosity, and justice. This image is by Tanya Webster.

The shared values represent our living tradition. It is a tradition that has taken us from a Christian faith in 16th century Europe to the pluralist, non-credal faith of today, where we live the questions rather than seeking solace in definite answers, and where we work in community to transform our own and our shared humanity so that the world can be more just and so that in our own lives, we can find truth and meaning.

The shared values can be seen as the wings that set us free. They allow us to pursue our free and responsible search for truth and meaning, to appreciate the interdependent web of all existence, to value the inherent worth and dignity of all people, to seek justice, and to transform, like a hungry caterpillar.

The shared values can also be seen as the roots that hold us close. Love has been a universal value that underpins every religion, not just ours, as expressed in many different versions of “do unto others as you would have them do unto you”. Pluralism was at the root of early Unitarianism, when Unitarian King John Sigismund of Transylvania issued the 1568 edict of Torda, proclaiming religious freedom. Justice and equity have driven many Unitarian actions, including support for freedom from slavery. The interdependence of all creation has underpinned Unitarian commitment to environmental justice. And generosity, finally, is the foundation of our open and welcoming community, and our sacraments of generosity in koha, and of hospitality in our sharing of kai and conversation

The values also reflect the roots and wings specifically of Auckland Unitarians, who have been meeting here since 1901.

To further mix our metaphor, we have a vessel and a foundation, in which and on which we can experience both our roots and our wings. This foundation is represented in a history of constitutional documents. We have a paper that anyone can read that outlines the journey of those foundational documents. We decided to call this service “Roots hold me close, wings set me free”, not “A history of our constitution”, because we wanted people to come.

In our early times, more than one hundred years ago, we had a trust and a congregation, that were separate entities, one concerned with maintaining the physical assets of the church, and the other concerned with the life of the church as a community.

In the past two years, the documents dealing with our constitutional arrangements have needed to be reviewed, for two reasons. Both reasons are Acts of Parliament. One is the Trusts Act 2019 and the other is the Incorporated Societies Act 2022. We are currently compliant with neither.

Your management committee and the existing trustees have worked to trace the history of our constitution, and to make recommendation about how we can comply with our legal obligations. And also how we can ensure that our roots continue to hold us and that our wings continue to set us free.

One significant quirk of history for our congregation to appreciate is that, in 1980, our trust and our congregational entities were merged, without any apparent good reason. Since then, there has been significant confusion about the roles of the trust and the congregation.

To fix this, the trust is being confirmed as a separate entity. This is both good practice and legally compliant.

You can see if you read the paper that the Management Committee and other church members with historical knowledge of our church worked together to make sense of the history and have also taken legal advice to pave a way forward. In case you needed another metaphor.

The result of the trust being confirmed as a distinct entity is that the congregation also needs to have a legal identity. It is the recommendation of the management committee to the congregation that we become an incorporated society. There will be a vote on this recommendation in a properly constituted general meeting.

One of the legal requirements of the Incorporated Societies Act is to have a constitution. We currently have rules which more or less perform that function. The constitution has to describe the purpose of the society — in this case the congregation.

Our current constitutional documents don't include a purpose statement for our community.

We held workshops here in the church last year on 3 December to find out from our members what makes them feel they belong, and what they are most proud of. The outcomes of those workshops have been distilled into statements of purpose for our congregation:

Purpose Statements

- To foster a religious community that promotes a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; and
- To provide worship services consistent with Unitarian and Unitarian/Universalist living traditions; and
- To provide education, outreach and social justice activities for the benefit of the community.

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Purposes are a good anchor (so many metaphors!) We also need more detail to make a workable and legal compliant constitution. A subcommittee of the Management Committee — Betsy Marshall, Terry Childs, Jonathan Mason and me — has reviewed existing rules to ensure that we preserve the ways of working that serve us. These have been preserved and transferred to our new draft constitution. Other features of the draft constitution we haven't had before include clear processes for becoming and ceasing to be a member, provisions for conflict resolution, and a requirement to maintain an up-to-date register of members.

So, what next?

The draft constitution is being reviewed by lawyers to ensure it is compliant.

Once we've heard back from them, we will call a Special General Meeting for members to vote on the recommendation to become an incorporated society, and to accept the new constitution.

The history of our constitutional arrangements is the little-told, somewhat dry stream (yes, another metaphor!) of a history that includes a travelling horse-drawn bus taking Unitarianism to the people, the city's first performance pipe organ (now lovingly restored and still very much here), long-involved families including the Mackys, mentioned on several plaques on our walls and still actively supporting us, support for conscientious objectors in the world wars of the 20th century, the Workers Education Association meeting here and performing original plays, the launching of the Rafters folk club in the '60s which is still going strong, the joint ministry of Noel and Thelma Blyth, the waves of migrants, particularly from the US, who continue to find a spiritual home here, a haven for the Polynesian Panthers who ran a homework club here, the joint ministry of Linda and Max Moss, participation in the fight for marriage equality, membership of the

Living Wage Movement and Te Ohu Whakawhanaunga, providing sanctuary for Indian students facing deportation, Clay Nelson's ministry (described by Max Moss, Minister Emeritus as a "golden age"), and countless individual stories of spiritual transformation and strength from community.

Indeed, our roots hold us close and our wings set us free.

Amen

Meditation / Discussion starter:-

What holds you close?

What sets you free?