

“Our Unique Unitarian Gift”

Presented by Rev. James Robinson at the LDPA/SUA Meeting in Portsmouth, Autumn 2006

There is something we can do in Unitarian and Free Christian churches and chapels which no other group in Britain can do, as well as we can. We can gather people together in small groups and talk sensitively and safely about our diverse spiritual journeys.

Certainly, small groups gather (throughout Britain) to talk about spirituality: Christian groups, Islamic groups, Jewish groups, Sikh groups, and so on. All of these gatherings are very important and we, as Unitarians, respect them highly. But in these groups, you either agree with their theological view point or creed, or else you really don't belong.

Certainly, there are times in British life when people of different spiritual and religious views share their beliefs. It could be a radio programme, a television talk show, an interfaith event. All of these interactions are valuable, and we as Unitarians support them. But they are (almost always) one off events and are held in a public venue, making disclosure of deeper feelings or faith a risky business.

What we Unitarians do is unique. We gather theists, agnostics, atheists, Pagans, Christians, Buddhists, followers of all traditional religions, people who believe in angels, people who do not believe in angels, people who believe in after life, people who do not believe in after life, people who pray and people who never pray, people who meditate and people who never meditate, people who are humanistic and people who are spiritual mystics, and more differences than I could ever mention, and we gather them together in the same place at the same time and share our spiritual journeys. And we do it, not just once, but consistently, week after week. That is our uniqueness as Unitarians in modern Britain.

For example, we have a group at Rosslyn Hill Unitarian Chapel, in North London, which meets twice a month on a Friday evening. The group lights candles and then shares 20 minutes of quiet, during which participants meditate or pray in their own manner. Then we talk about a spiritual topic. In the past two years we have covered topics such as faith, love, suffering, ethical values, spiritual journeys, how to deepen the quality of human life, and many more. As you can see, we have talked about key spiritual questions. About 12 people attend the group regularly, with an average attendance of 8 on any given Friday. Participants have Buddhist, Hindu, theistic, scientific, Christian, Jewish, agnostic, etc. leanings or beliefs. What happens during our sharing is that we find both areas of common agreement and areas of difference. Each participant clarifies their spirituality and deepens their understanding of others. We experience an affirming and loving community, and our own spiritual journey is inevitably deepened.

In the past few years, such spiritual sharing groups within Unitarian settings have been called “engagement groups”. But the name does not matter – any sensible name will do. And there are many different examples of how Unitarian churches or chapels foster such groups. Here is a sampling:

+ Newington Green Unitarian Church holds a weekly Tuesday evening event including a simple meal, meditation, and an art project focusing on a spiritual theme. People share their spiritual journeys through art;

+ Sevenoaks Meeting House has a monthly evening group called Reflections which has covered a wide range of spiritual topics. People share their spiritual journeys through sharing their reflections;

+ Richmond Unitarian Church has had a knitting group which shares spiritual journeys while creating gifts for people with special needs. People share by telling the story of their spiritual journey;

+ Kensington Unitarian Church has a “Reading Engagement Group” which selects and discusses books of spiritual and ethical interest. People share their spiritual insights through discussion;

+ Croydon has had a monthly group which used the poetry of the Sufi mystic Rumi to evoke spiritual sharing between participants. People share their spiritual journey through the medium of poetry;

+ Golders Green Unitarian Church holds a monthly sacred dance group. People share their spiritual journeys through the medium of dance.

Some Unitarian Churches or Chapels are small and their Sunday worship service itself becomes the opportunity for a small group of people to share their diverse spiritual view points. If your regular worship attendance is under 15 people, then your worship service can be a ready made engagement or sharing group. At Rosslyn Hill Chapel, in addition to our morning service, we also hold a Sunday evening service. The average attendance is 12 people. I (or another worship leader) presents a theme and our ideas, and then open up the topic for sharing among the group. It has become a worship-engagement group. People share their diverse spiritual views and journeys in a safe and encouraging atmosphere. This is true for other smaller Unitarian worship settings as well. Being small can be beautiful. It can give everyone the opportunity to share.

Whether a small Sunday worship service or a mid-week programme, these groups have something in common: people sharing their diverse spiritual or religious view points within a safe and encouraging community. There are some key principles which make a Unitarian group safe and encouraging. Here are some of those principles:

+ Different spiritual view points are accepted, i.e., there is not just one way to believe. Humanists and theists are both valuable. People who pray and people who do not pray are both valuable. And so on;

+ Everyone gets a chance to share who wants to, and no one person dominates the conversation. Everyone gets an equal chance to share;

+ People do not judge or criticize each other;

+ People do not cross talk, that is, people do not try to speak over the voice of another, and people do not hold side conversations;

+ People share in a contemplative atmosphere. This means people actually listen to one another with care and respect, and there are often silences after a person shares so what they said can really be appreciated.

+ People do not debate and try to win an argument. Loving kindness replaces the desperate need to be right.

+ The group focuses on spiritual or ethical themes.

These principles of sharing create safe and genuine spiritual community. This helps people clarify their personal faith and most importantly, helps them to live it in daily life. Daily lives are made more sacred and ethical. The real point of spiritual sharing is to help us deeply live our spirituality in daily life. How we act is more important than what we say we believe. We often end our small groups at Rosslyn Hill Chapel with the question: “What is one thing you would like to do this week to put our topic into practice?”

One critical factor in healthy Unitarian sharing or engagement groups is the facilitator or facilitators. Someone needs to take responsibility for keeping the group safe and encouraging. Someone needs to remind everyone to follow the sharing principles. Some people can do this facilitation without any extra training. Others need some guidance.

Let me give you one small example of how a facilitator keeps a group safe and encouraging. In a recent engagement group at Rosslyn Hill Chapel, someone spoke about their experience of God’s presence. This triggered something in another person, who quickly challenged the person by saying: “But what about all the cruelty in the world. How can there be a God allowing that?” Now, this is certainly a legitimate question. But the questioner did not respectfully listen to the person sharing. They did not pause and let what the other person say sink in. Instead, they wanted to start a heated debate about how believing in God is naive. Arguing, debating, and judging are not appropriate in a safe and encouraging Unitarian engagement or sharing group. So as facilitator, I needed to step in quickly, and say: “Your question is a valid one, but we are not here to try to change one another or debate with on another. We are here to listen respectfully and appreciate our differences.” This intervention was enough to calm the situation and for the safety of the group to continue.

At first, it may seem daunting to consider being a facilitator. But really, it is not as difficult as it seems. Anyone who has good people skills can facilitate a group, although attending a workshop on Unitarian engagement or sharing groups can be helpful.

There is a tremendous need in Britain for the kinds of groups we Unitarians can offer. One way I experience this need in society is when I officiate at weddings. When I prepare weddings, for non chapel couples (which I do regularly), I often encounter something I call “spiritual illiteracy”. Here is how the conversation will often go:

I say: “In a Unitarian church or chapel, we welcome a wide diversity of spiritual view points. Each wedding or rite or passage will differ, according to the spiritual faith of the primary participants. So I will be helpful for me to know about your spiritual faith.”

The couple will say (each in their turn) something like: “I was raised in this or that tradition, but I left it, and I don’t go anywhere now. I am not religious but I am spiritual.”

I say: “That is fine. That is good. What is your spirituality?”

They say: “I don’t believe in a man with a beard on a throne.”

I say: “That’s good. What do you believe in?”

Then there is an awkward pause. They say: “I don’t know what to say.”

I would estimate that in three out of four couples which I meet with, the participants cannot sensitively describe their spiritual faith. This does not make them bad people. They are good people, just as good as I am. But this is, I think, unfortunate. One thing I have discovered, after nearly 30 years in the ministry, is when the tough times occur, you suddenly wish you had explored your spiritual faith more deeply. But more than that, someone who can sensitively understand and describe their faith, will probably be able to live it (apply it) more clearly in daily life. Large scale surveys show that people who can articulate a spiritual faith are less likely to be alcoholic or addicted, and are more likely to be engaged in life in a positive manner. Some studies indicate that people with a sensible spiritual faith actually live longer.

People sometimes say to us: “You Unitarians don’t believe in anything!” But really, we believe in a lot. We believe in human dignity; love; the free search for truth; service; environmental stewardship; justice; the democratic method; compassion; and similar values. We have deeply held spiritual values, which we have clarified over our 400 years of Unitarian history. With those values as a foundation, we can allow and celebrate a diversity of religious and philosophical beliefs. It is because we Unitarians are so deeply spiritual that we can be so deeply respectful of differences.

We Unitarians are in a unique position in British society. We can gather small groups of people together to share their diverse spiritual journeys in a safe and encouraging manner. This creates loving community and helps people clarify their own faith, allowing them to live it more fully in daily life. So, my friends, go from here today, and help your Unitarian church or chapel fulfil its unique and life affirming purpose. In this way, you can bring hope to a despairing world.