



**Meadville Lombard**  
Theological School

## **RESPONSE TO “THE MARKETING OF LIBERAL RELIGION”**

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Meadville Lombard January 2009 Convocation

**January 8, 2009**

As a relatively new minister, I am especially grateful for the opportunity to participate in this conversation. David, it is an honor to be here with you and to have the opportunity to respond to your thoughtful, provocative, and impassioned paper. Your love of and dedication to the faith to which you have given much of your life is evident here – and I am grateful for your service and your constant nudging in love as you demand that we ask and answer the tough questions.

Your presence here at Meadville Lombard drew me to begin attending this school almost ten years ago, and I knew then, just as I do now – that I would learn some of my most important lessons in the ministry from seasoned, dedicated, and scholarly Unitarian Universalist ministers. Thank you for all that you have done and all that you will continue to do – thank you for the innumerable ways that your legacy of ministry and teaching will continue to shape our movement in the years to come.

For the past four and a half years, I have had the pleasure of serving as the Associate Minister at the First Unitarian Church of Rochester, New York, where I am primarily responsible for our ministries of pastoral care and adult spiritual development. Perhaps best known in the past 40 years as Dick Gilbert’s church – with a particular focus on social justice – our church in Rochester is now emerging from a significant ministerial transition – as a healthy, vibrant, effective, and growing church. In the past five years we have welcomed over three hundred and thirty new members to our congregation – and it is from this congregational context that I bring my response. But before I get to David’s paper – I want to bring in a bit more of our larger context – the context of religion and churches in America.

When the Unitarians and the Universalists came together nearly fifty years ago to form a new movement as the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, they did so in the midst of a country where the role of the church in society – any church – was changing. With the autonomous individual asserting its place as the ultimate authority in answering questions of how to live, the church had been removed as the custodian of national morality and ethics.<sup>1</sup> “Many mainstream congregations,” Diana Butler Bass, church scholar explains, “became a kind of Christian version of the Rotary Club, understanding the church as a religious place for social acceptability and business connections ...

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imaging a New Old Church* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), p.24.

Everyone was welcome – with no spiritual demands other than to conform to some sort of generalized Protestant morality.”<sup>2</sup>

With the church serving more as social club than moral and spiritual guide, membership demands declined, and in time, so did overall church membership numbers as well. If the individual was indeed the ultimate authority in answering questions of how to live – then what could churches rightfully demand of their members, and what need did anyone have for a church anyway? What purpose should the church serve in the world, and who should it serve?

As David notes – Unitarians and Universalists and later, Unitarian Universalists – struggled with these questions as did churches all over America. Within this larger context, our faith communities floundered perhaps a bit more than others. Given that we had no shared statement of faith to begin with, and given that so many of the new members that did make their way to our doors were reacting against past religious harms done – we were perhaps shyer than others when it came to defining our beliefs and asserting our unique calling in the world. As we watched our numbers dwindle, we, along with other liberal religious communities, fell into the trap that our consumer driven culture laid for us – believing that more of anything is better, regardless of its quality – hoping and trusting that numerical growth alone could and would save us. And this, I believe along with David, was a dire mistake.

I believe that Unitarian Universalism – with its message of hope, love and faith in each individual – offers a transforming message for us as individuals and for our world. Unitarian Universalism done right asks us to live at the intersection of spiritual development and social justice, and it is my hope that our community of faith will continue to reach out to all who might benefit from our way of life. But I want to be clear – when I talk about the importance of growing Unitarian Universalism and the congregation I serve – I firmly believe that the push for church growth must never eclipse our efforts to foster church depth. Numerical growth is not a worthy goal in and of itself, and on a practical level – we have seen through church research and lived experience that numerical growth comes from the development of an authentic mission and message. It comes when others see us living out our values, living lives of integrity, service and joy, creating authentic change in our world.

Numerical growth follows spiritual deepening as we extend a constant effort to ensure that there are seats at the table for those who come through our doors. No marketing campaign or outreach effort alone will ever be enough to grow our liberal religious communities – nor am I interested in offering up hollow, well-marketed promises. I know that our congregations can be places of genuine individual and societal transformation for the better – and this is the message and the story we need to tell. It may be a longer and more complicated story than you can tell in an elevator – but still, it is the story that needs telling. If we indeed hope to grow in our impact in the lives of individuals and the world, our focus must be on increasing our spiritual depth and the warmth of our welcome. The numbers will follow.

In his paper, Rev. Bumbaugh summarizes his understanding of the differing agendas that Unitarians and Universalists brought to the merger nearly fifty years ago. The Universalists, David suggests, “brought to the merger an important, but unfinished theological concern, while Unitarians brought to merger a set

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<sup>2</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 2006), pp.36-7.

of highly questionable marketing plans.” (5) It goes without saying that of course, both denominations brought so much more to the table than this – and they certainly came to the table ready to break bread over the common concern of their much beloved communities of faith dwindling in numbers, relevance, and effectiveness in the world. From this common desire for their faith communities to survive, flourish, and make a better world – Unitarian Universalism emerged with a need to answer theological questions of depth while also struggling to develop a meaningful plan to address church growth.

And unlike David – I do not see this proposition as an either or prospect. While I believe first and foremost that our congregations must grow in depth, I also know that as a part of this contemporary culture we cannot completely dismiss the waters that we swim within. If we do so, we intentionally exclude and overlook most of the country and thereby relegate ourselves to ineffectiveness yet again. Simply put, I believe that our strength and effectiveness as a movement lies in a both-and approach – an approach that prioritizes theological depth and spiritual growth in our congregations while also reaching out to the larger world in a language that they understand to bring folks through our doors.

Over the past four years, The First Unitarian Church of Rochester has embodied this both-and challenge. Upon our arrival in 2004, the three ministers immediately began developing a comprehensive approach to membership, stewardship, and small group ministry. We developed a year-long program of spiritual deepening that offers meaningful tools and asks participants to live at the intersection of spiritual development and social justice. We also enhanced our public presence in the community through press coverage, the banner that hangs on the front of our building, an attractive and interactive website, a weekly radio show, and a door-to-door evangelical campaign through our neighborhood. Through this both – and approach, we have welcomed over three hundred and thirty new members in four years – new members who hunger for something more than theology light and sound bite answers.

In contemporary society, where nomadic spirituality has been a given for many for most of their lives,<sup>3</sup> a shift in American religion is occurring. This shift, spotted by Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow in the late 1990’s, can best be described as a shift from seeker spirituality to practice-oriented spirituality.<sup>4</sup> On the whole, individuals who make their way to our churches are no longer interested in walking the hallways around our sanctuaries, considering whether or not they’d like to join in. Individuals who make their way to our churches today come longing to jump in with both feet, hoping and expecting to find in our congregations not only questions at the center of their new found faith, but also tools that can help them to answer those questions.

We have certainly seen this in our congregation in Rochester as new members arrive hungry for engagement with deep theological questions and the experiences of their lives. They want a church that will hold the bar high – a community of friends in faith who will remind them of their values and demand that they live in accordance with them. Folks come to our church because they want to change their lives and because they want to change the world. They demand that we give them something worthy of their time and attention on Sunday mornings and throughout the week – they ask us to go

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<sup>3</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 2006), p.23.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp.168-198.

deep with them – to listen and reflect and shine light on the dangers of our particular time, while offering up real and useful tools for the journey of faith we walk together. In Rochester, we have become a healthier, more effective, and growing congregation by inviting people in and offering them real tools for their spiritual journey.

And while I can hardly believe that I am going to say this out loud, this is perhaps the place where I differ most significantly from my beloved teacher and colleague. In his paper, David asserts that we need a statement of faith for all of us as Unitarian Universalists - a defining, core statement of faith. After much conversation and discernment, I'm surprised to find myself saying that I'm not so sure about this – and not because I don't think it is important to be able to know and speak and live clearly from our faith – because I do – but because I am not so sure that something that comes from above or beyond us as individuals and individual congregations can be as helpful or effective as we need it to be.

Our congregations are distinct entities – joined together in association to foster their own greater good and the greater good of the world. They each carry distinctive histories and theologies which drive and define them in their own communities. As I have learned and worked in two of our most vibrant congregations in St. Paul and Rochester – I have been impressed by their tremendous differences and by the similarities that drive their health and effectiveness. Neither congregation would wholly share the other's key theological statement – but both have one. Neither would instinctively welcome a faith statement from above or beyond their walls as their own, but both have done the hard and inspiring work as congregations to answer the three foundational questions that David offers. Neither of these healthy and effective congregations demand adherence to a specific, congregationally shared, statement of faith for membership – but both offer up the tools and the on-going relationships by which individual congregants can meaningfully state and restate their own beliefs and all that these beliefs call them to do and be in the world.

In our deeply independent congregations – our new members are coming to us wanting to do this work themselves. The majority of our new members in Rochester eagerly attend three introductory sessions, join a small group, pledge at leadership levels, and attend church regularly. Most attend Starting Point – a four session class on the history and theology of our church, the basics of Unitarian Universalism, and the tools necessary for a distinctively Unitarian Universalist spiritual journey. In this class, the congregation's overarching theological framework is explained and then used as a basis for small group discussion. Many members, new and seasoned, go on to attend Wellspring – a year-long exploration of our Unitarian Universalist history and theology coupled with a commitment to daily spiritual practice, work with a spiritual director, and twice monthly small group meetings. More often than not, our new members meet and exceed our expectations for membership and jump in to both theological discussion and opportunities for service.

My perspective is limited, of course, by my relatively short tenure in the ministry and by the congregations I have served. But I am convinced in this moment that we need to focus not on the creation of a universal faith statement for all of our congregations – but rather we need to focus on offering one another the tools and support to do the work of faith definition and expression as individuals and as congregations.

It will not be enough – as David was quoted saying in our most recent Report from the Commission of Appraisal – “It will not be enough to offer people the opportunity to ‘build your own theology.’ They must be offered the freedom to build their own theology in the context of a community which is asking serious and probing religious questions, and has the courage to make deep and profound affirmations – questions and affirmations rooted in a sense of who we are and what we are profoundly about.”<sup>5</sup>

In this age of secularism and fragmentation, in an age of individuals longing for authentic communities of faith and a great adventure of transformation and newfound wholeness, I believe, along with Diana Butler Bass, that the real vocation of our congregations must be to “to turn tourists into pilgrims.”<sup>6</sup> And I worry that in handing folks a statement of faith when they walk in the door, we might be unintentionally encouraging tourism yet again.

In these post-modern times, in a time and for a generation when no one grand story can encompass it all, I believe that we would best serve one another and our faith by offering up broad theological frameworks that folks can situate their own experience within. These can – and should be – deeply theological frameworks. For purposes of example only, I offer up the theological framework that we are currently using in Rochester. Simply put, this framework states that as Unitarian Universalists, we are called to Listen, Open, and Serve. We are called to Listen to our deepest selves, Open to the gifts of the world, and Serve needs greater than our own. Based primarily on the assumption that the most grievous sin we commit in this day and age is the sin of disconnection – this framework asserts that deep down within we carry an innate health and wholeness – that when we are able to connect with this deepest self, and open to all of the gifts of the world (including suffering), we can then eagerly respond to the constant call of the world to serve needs greater than our own. While on the surface, the framework we offer may not appear to have deep theological roots – the assumptions which underlie it do.

As I delve deeper into the prospect of an overarching Unitarian Universalist statement of faith, surprisingly, I find myself more interested in statements of faith for our congregations and for us as individuals. And while I do not dismiss efforts at advertising entirely, I do believe that our primary efforts must be aimed at increasing spiritual depth in our congregations – answering the unfinished theological questions that both Universalists and Unitarians brought to the merger in the context of our contemporary culture and challenges. We can move in this direction as an association when we stop pouring the limited money we have into national advertising campaigns first and begin, instead, to do a better job of supporting our effective, healthy, and growing congregations as they continue their good work and share their initiatives with others. Together we can support each other as individuals and as congregations as we answer the foundational questions David offered up – What do we believe? Whom do we serve? To whom are we responsible? – daring to speak boldly out of our own experience and distinctive heritage as we continue to “breathe new life into old forms” and reshape our faith.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.81.

<sup>6</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imaging a New Old Church* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), p.60.