

A Sacred Trust

by Linda Thomson

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Here we are on a late summer Sunday. Today we are celebrating and reflecting on the formal start of another church year. This congregation has a long history of starts and restarts. I think it makes sense to stop for a moment and think about the first start and the people who were part of it. In 1889 a group of people in Hamilton founded a Unitarian congregation. Those founders of our congregation deserve our thanks. They risked so much and worked so hard. They risked their reputations in this community: to be a Unitarian in those days was considered, even more than we can imagine, a radical act. They worked hard: I've seen, close up, the effort it takes to start a new congregation—it is a daunting task!

I can only imagine what those women and men might think if they were able to join us here today. For their understanding of what it meant to be a liberal congregation was different than ours. It's fairly certain that those founders considered themselves Christian. This congregation, like others, had a Woman's auxiliary, pictures tell us that white gloves and hats for women and ties and jackets for men were the expected dress code. Old denominational resources are full of masculine references for the divine and use male language to refer to people. We'd, with our short sleeves and trouser clad women, startle them. Our understanding of families would be unfamiliar to them. Our expanded theological diversity might intrigue them. Yet, for the differences, there is a thread of continuity between that congregation and the one that gathers here today. Those people were making active choices to ensure that they, and those they've not yet met, had a liberal religious alternative in Hamilton. Those early members believed in the capacity of human agency to deal with earthly problems, and that the Christian duty was to try to bring heaven to earth. You and I might not talk about Christian duty or use the same language to describe our beliefs in the ability and duty we have to address concerns and issues. But when we get past the language and the theological assumptions, we do have common aspirations.

Those of us who gather here today in anticipation of another church year do so as an act of solidarity with the founders of this congregation. We gather, no doubt, for a variety of reasons. Yet if we are to keep faith with those who dared, nearly 120 years ago, to start this congregation, I believe we ought to consider what it means now, in 2008 to be a member of this community.

Rev. Dr. David Bambaugh, one of the professors at Meadville Lombard Theologi-

cal School, where I am a ministerial student, says the fundamental questions for a religious person are these:

- What do we believe?
- Whom do we serve?
- To whom or what are we responsible?

And, I'd say, they are also the fundamental questions for a religious community.

His trinity of questions suggests we need to know who we are and what we believe, that we need to consider our practical function in the world, to answer the question, how we can be of service. Finally, the third question asks us to consider where our responsibility lies—where we must answer. Your answers to those questions, as an individual, would no doubt, be different than mine. As, in our liberal tradition, we'd expect them to be. Congregationally though, I'd suggest we'd be well served by having commonly held responses to the questions.

It seems to me we have relative clarity on the “what do we believe front.” We know that our tradition is a liberal one that encourages each person to seek carefully to determine the answers that best serve their individual journey. We believe this is good and appropriate, and ask that we give one another gentle challenge, but high respect, so that in community we can consider new ideas, new ways of understanding ultimate meaning.

Whom do we serve, seems less clear to me. But it seems that with a bit of digging we can offer some relatively easily accepted responses here too. We serve our membership, to be sure. But we also serve the larger community, and the world. We serve justice and freedom. We may not be completely sure about how to handle all the needs that we might serve, but we know they are there and that there is more to do than we could possibly respond to.

It is Bumbaugh's final question; “To whom or what are we responsible” is the question that I want to turn to this morning. In this theologically diverse congregation we can't answer quite as simply as others might. God, is a simple and obvious answer in many traditions. But it doesn't serve this community quite as easily. There are, I believe, ways we can talk about this question, that can help us come to *some* agreement, in concept—if not in words, about a response.

Which takes me back to the founders of this congregation. 120 years ago, believing in the possibility and promise of a liberal religious community they put their shoulders to the wheel and began the hard work of building a congregation. Progress has not been linear! While in continuous existence since those days, the congregation has at time barely existed. There was a period when an annual meeting

was the only activity. Membership has risen and fallen. Their work was undertaken as an act of faith and hope and the outcome was far from certain. I have no doubt that the people who gathered that congregation did so because they longed for a place where they might explore questions of faith and meaning in a context that made sense to them. I have no doubt they did the work because it served them. But, I also am convinced that they also were thinking of their future—of us.

Their choice to establish this congregation and the choices that subsequent members made are evidence that they had faith in the future. Think for a moment, of what would be missing in your life, the lives of the children who are part of this congregation, and the lives of those that this congregation has served; through its stands on equal marriage, its participation in the out of the cold program and the work it contributed in the founding of the Housing Emergency Loan Program (and those are just the efforts of the past few years). What happens here on Sunday morning and throughout the week matters. It matters to those who gather and to those who don't. I remember at the dedication of this building that Rabbi Bernard Baskin told us that he was glad to be here, celebrating with us, because he believed Hamilton needed us!

Now, I'm not naïve. I know that there are times we (along with every other congregation or group of people, that has, does or will exist) don't get it right. There are times when our ability to foster the kind of community we dream of will fall short. Our dreams of a supportive community, our dreams of a community that helps us grow, our dreams of a community that serves the world, are in this adventure called congregational life, often not realized. But I've come to believe that's ok, in fact, I've come to believe that's where part of our good news lies. Each of us is a wonder—Ralph Waldo Emerson, spoke of the “spark of the divine” in each person. But, as humans we are inescapably flawed, we will make mistakes; we'll fall short of our ideals. Congregations, because they are human institutions, will be similarly divine and flawed. I've come to appreciate this and other thoughtful communities as places where we strive to hold one another gently during those times. And where, when we fail to be as gentle as we might, others will be gentle with us. I believe in my core that this potential is part of what makes congregational life worth the effort. We can explore questions of ultimate meaning together; for some of us that requires contemplation and for others it requires action and the practical pursuit of justice. We can model human community here. We can explore what it means to be fully human—beauty spots and warts and all. It is because this is a place where all the realities of human existence are played out that I find it so incredibly meaningful. In tough times and in glorious times we come together to ask ourselves the big questions. Without this community many of us would

lack the reflective community that helps equip us for the work we feel the need to do. Mark Morrison-Reed, who served as co-minister at Toronto First for over 15 years, wrote when considering congregational life, “*Together* our vision widens and our strength is renewed.” I believe the work of being in community, of being engaged in congregational life is as important as any work there is to do. But, I’m not sure, it is quite enough. If we think primarily about how *we* are enriched by the experience of congregational life I think we might fail to understand fully, why it is we gather and what it is we celebrate at this formal start to the church year.

Which brings me back once again to the last of Bumbaugh’s questions; “To whom or what are we responsible.” It is an important question. Our answer will make all the difference to what we do, and who we will become as a congregation. I think Bumbaugh’s question asks us about the responsibilities we have to one another and to the larger community—the context in which we do ministry.

But I believe that for me, the full answer is in my hands. I reach out this hand (right hand) in solidarity with those who dared, almost 120 years ago to dream the audacious dream of a Unitarian Congregation in Hamilton. Who dared, and worked and risked so that generations of children and adults could gather and learn and grow and struggle together. I have a sacred trust with them. And I reach out this hand, (left hand) with less certainty, because the future is less certain, to those already born who long, who long for a liberal religious community such as this one. I reach it out to the unborn, who will need, just as we have, a place to shine in our moments of glory and to struggle in dark times. I reach out to those who will, even as we have, ask themselves, how can I make a difference? Who am I called to be? I have a sacred trust with them. And as I hold their hands, I dare to look at all of you... and to ask you, “To whom or what are we, the members of the First Unitarian Church of Hamilton, here today, in 2008, responsible” I have a sacred trust with each of you too... because I believe we have important work to do here, in respect to those who came before, in trust to those who will come after us, and in service to each other and the world today.

Blessed be.