

# **“The Church I Joined”**

**a reflection  
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

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It is a strange and beautiful mystery, this thing we call “church.” Few institutions in American life, few topics of conversation, few concepts, engender as much emotion, as much passion, as much ... controversy ... as does “church.”

I have lived in cities where the routine first question one asks, upon meeting someone else for the first time, is “Where do you go to church?” In those parts of the country, of course, the assumption is that *everyone* belongs to some church or another – and it is not considered at all rude, or invasive, to ask this introductory question of a complete stranger.

I have lived, as well, in other places where the subject of church *never* comes up in conversation – not so much out of deference to each person’s privacy, but rather because it is assumed, in such places, that most people do not go to church. In those parts of the country, I have gotten strange, confused, almost alarmed looks, when I happened to mention that I *am* a church-goer.

And then there’s even the very word itself – “*church*.” I have been a member of UU churches – well, congregations – where that word itself, is verboten. In such congregations, or fellowships, or societies, as they often prefer to be called, the word “church” has taken on such emotional significance, that its very use is frowned upon. I suppose this is because so many Unitarian Universalists have had less-than-positive experiences, earlier in their lives, in more *traditional* churches – in the kind of orthodox institutions in which people sometimes act as if they have exclusive *ownership* of certain powerful words, like “church” or “God.”

Thankfully – or, shall I say, “thank God” – I have also been a member of Unitarian Universalist churches where the use of religious words – words that hold and convey spiritual meaning and power – is *not* a problem! Thankfully, and thank God, Heritage is such a church.

I relate these personal experiences, this morning, on a day in which we have inducted six new members into this strange and beautiful mystery we choose to

call “church,” precisely because they are that – my personal experiences. Chances are pretty good, that my own experience, does not match yours – though I suspect chances are also good that you’ll agree with me on at least one thing: The word “church,” and the concept – the institution – the kind of community that word represents – is one of the most emotionally charged (and therefore, *powerful*) words in the English language. You’ve heard it said that there are three topics, that can either bring conversation to a crashing halt – or, on the other hand, sharply increase that conversation’s volume and intensity: sex, politics, and religion.

Not to disappoint you, but we’re not here this morning to talk about sex – or politics, for that matter. No, our topic today, is that *other* third rail of human discourse: religion. In this particular case, *church*.

One of the most troubling comments I hear – one of the most *disquieting* statements I have encountered, again and again, in the course of what is now nearly two decades of church work – and I have heard this comment as both a lay member, *and* as a minister – is when someone says, either to me, or to another leader in the congregation, “This is just no longer the church I joined...”

That kind of thing is painful to hear. It is very sad to think that anyone would ever grow to feel that way about their spiritual community. Such a statement, of course, implies many deeper layers of meaning, but I believe that the common thread, running through all such comments, is a profound feeling of *loss* – the loss, I would go so far as to say, of an ideal.

Because the truth of the matter is, far too often, when people join a church, in their minds – and in their hearts – they are becoming part of ... not a flawed, flesh-and-blood community, but rather an *idealized vision* of community. Far too often, when we join a church we are, emotionally, casting our lot – not with a group of people whom we have encountered, at both their best, and their worst, and with whom we therefore enter into relationship with eyes wide open – but rather we are, at some level, seeking out something that we have nowhere else in our lives – because it does not exist, in reality: an *ideal* community, a perfect society, the kind of family we longed for, but never had, growing up.

It is the stark contrast between an ideal community, and a real community, that I believe to be the source of much of our frustration, our hurt feelings, our *disillusion*, when it comes to this beautiful and mysterious thing, we call “church.”

I trust that you are familiar with the concept of *projection*. Psychologically, emotionally, it is one of the primary ways in which human beings interact with their environment. It is both common, and normal, for people to *project*, to interpret the actions and motivations of others, the significance of not only objects, but of events and even feelings – through the lens of their own *personal* experience, their own life’s story – a story which, ironically enough, is itself constantly being written, and re-written.

I trust, as well, that you will not disagree when I say that the only real *constant*, in life, is change. It has become almost a mantra, here in this particular Unitarian Universalist church, at this particular era in its history, that we are a “changing” church. People smile, or grimace (I know, because I’m up here, and I can see your faces!) – each time we sing that line, in the hymn: “Don’t be afraid of some change.”

But *there’s* the rub! We are afraid of change. All of us. It’s only natural. There is a certain comfort, a certain ease, in the familiar. People need to feel the security of something that is consistent. We want – we so desperately *want* – to have touchstones in our lives, to be part of an institution, and to connect with people, that we can believe is and are *unchanging*.

But the truth is – they are not. In fact, even though this is a deep, and innate, human longing – and perhaps it is even the root of the religious impulse itself – the desire for permanence, for something to hold onto that is unchanging, is a desire destined to be *unfulfilled*. Many is the marriage, or the friendship, that ends in disillusionment, when one is unable to accept the fact that one’s partner is – and always will be – a growing, changing, evolving human being. Many is the relationship, too, that is dashed on the rocks of denial – denial of the fact that we, ourselves, are *also* ever-changing, evolving creatures.

But we need not be unwitting victims of denial, or disillusion. When we can enter into our relationships – including our relationships with institutions such as the church – when we are able to enter into those relationships with open *eyes*, as well as open hearts – when we take the time to get to know another, rather than idealize them – when we acknowledge and accept that they, and we, will inevitably be growing and changing, throughout the course of our time together, whatever limited length of time, that may be – then, and only then, will we be able to know the profound *depth* and *power*, of mature relationship.

My prayer, today, for our new members – my prayer for each *one* of us, whether we have been part of this community for 30 years, or 30 minutes – is that we will come to find, here, in Heritage Church, that kind of *mature relationship*. That we will bring to our relationship with this strange and mysterious institution – and with the equally strange and mysterious individuals who comprise it – my hope is that we will bring to those relationships *realistic expectations*, both of the other, and of ourselves. That we will not, someday in the future, find ourselves saying, “This is *just not* the church I joined.”

Which is why I will say, flat out, this morning – right here and now – to Naomi and David, George and Merrijo, to Pat and to Suzi – that the Heritage Church of a few years hence (or even a few *months* hence) will certainly *not* be the church you join today. *How* could it possibly be otherwise? Institutions, evolve. Communities, change. *People* – change.

What's more – and this is perhaps my main point – I would also contend the church that, say, David chose, with intention and good faith, to join today, is not, and was never, the same church that his own beloved *wife* joined – much less, the same church that Mary Pat, or Suzi, or George, or Merrijo, or any one of us – joined. Because we *each* bring different outlooks, different needs, different personal experiences into this, and all of our relationships. Just as the signature of every member who has ever inscribed his or her name into this historic membership book is unique – just as each distinctive signature itself hints at some of the individual hopes and dreams, joys and sorrows, flair and spirit of every member of this church – so too, we *each* see this community – this community, which we have *chosen* to join – we each see it, quite literally, through a different set of eyes. We each *experience* it, in very different ways.

For some, ours is a supportive, loving environment in which to share life's journey. For others, Heritage is an institution through which greater justice can be achieved, in a world that cries out for it. For some, this is an extended family. For others, it is a place of spiritual refuge. Some come here to learn; others, to lead.

Last night, we held one of our “Get Acquainted Dinners” here at Heritage Church. Three or four times a year, we offer this opportunity for those who are new to our congregation to meet some of our church leaders, and to get to know one another, over dinner. We break bread, share stories, and learn more about this very special (though not as unique as we'd like to believe!) place. It is one of the many steps, on our path to membership.

Invariably, during these introductory gatherings, someone asks the question: “What does this church *believe*?” My response is always the same: “Churches, don't have beliefs. People have beliefs.”

The point, of course, is that a church is nothing more – and nothing less – than a collection of people. A community, of *people*. Individuals, in relationship. By definition, then, it is an *institution* comprised of many beliefs, many and varied experiences. “One church, many paths.”

So let us not – as I say to couples during each wedding ceremony, or service of holy union, that I perform – let us not enter into this relationship lightly. Let us enter into it with full awareness of the limitations, of not only this strange, and mysterious thing we call church, but also of our own limitations. Because – again, as is the case in any committed, covenanted relationship – what we can learn, and what we can accomplish, together, far outweighs the difficulty of any challenges we may face. That, is what is both strange, and beautiful, about this thing we call church.

Essayist Kathleen Norris, in her book “Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith,” describes it thusly: “From the outside, churches look like remarkably contentious places, full of [people] who talk about love, while fighting each other,

tooth and nail. This, in fact, is the reason many folks give for staying *away* from churches... [But] at the risk of exposing myself as an eternal optimist,” she goes on, “I’d say that things are about as they should be... [After all, the church] is a *human* institution – full of ordinary people who sometimes say and do cruel and stupid things. But it is also an *inspired* institution – full of good [people and good] purpose – which partakes of [something] far greater than the sum of its parts...

“[Here, people] find a sufficient unity, a rubbed-raw but sufficient love – and sometimes, even the presence of God. I have only to look around at the other people in the church,” Norris says – and here, I will ask you to take a moment, yourself, to look around, at the other faces in this sanctuary ...

“...I have only to look around at the other people in the church,” she writes, “to remind myself that we are engaged in something *important* – something that transcends [all] our feeble attempts... [No,] we are not perfect, and we have our disagreements – but we also have each other.” And that, makes all the difference.

May this strange and mysterious thing we call church – may this very human, yet deeply *inspired*, institution that we call *Heritage Church* – be for us, and for those who will someday become its members – an ongoing, yet evolving – a comforting, yet challenging – community of faith, hope, and love – for generations to come.

May it be so. Amen.