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FAITH

From rugged cross to flaming chalice



Norma Drosdowech was a member of the United Church until 1992 when she switched to Unitarian Universalism. Photo by Phil Hossack

Many former United Church members drift toward Unitarian Universalism. So what's the attraction?

By Anne Bokma

After 20 years of (admittedly sporadic) attendance in the United Church, I looked up one Sunday morning six years ago at a stained glass window of Christ on the cross and had a moment of epiphany: I no longer believed in the divinity of Jesus. Acknowledging it meant I had a choice to make: live with the hypocrisy of staying in a church whose theology I no longer supported, or leave the security of a place that felt like home.

Eventually, my family and I left the United Church and began attending a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Some things were quite different: there were no crosses or Bibles, no communion or baptism. But others — the sense of entering a sacred space, gathering with fellow seekers, singing age-old hymns — were as familiar as a hard pew.

I am not alone in deciding to leave Canada's largest Protestant denomination for the relatively tiny ranks of Unitarian Universalism, a church of 50 congregations and 5,000 members (in Canada) who come from a variety of religious backgrounds and hold diverse spiritual beliefs. While the Unitarian church is hardly a threat to the 3,300-plus pastoral charges of the United Church, you don't have to look hard to find former United Church folks among its ranks. In fact, a 15-year-old survey of Unitarian members reveals the two main indicators for membership are post-secondary education and United Church membership.

Unitarian Universalism officially began in the United States in 1961 with the merger of two religions: Unitarianism and Universalism. While there are similarities in the beliefs of many United Church congregants and Unitarians — among them the rejection of original sin, eternal damnation and, in some quarters, open questioning of the divinity of Jesus — the primary difference is that Unitarians do not accept the idea of the trinity. (The name "Unitarian" refers to the unity or oneness of God.) Also, although Unitarian Universalism is rooted in the Christian faith, members do not necessarily identify themselves as Christian. Some believe in God, but others consider themselves agnostic or atheist. Instead of a cross, their symbol is a flaming chalice. What draws Unitarian congregations together is not a book, story, central figure, theology, belief system or creed, but a set of seven principles. Unitarians draw from

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many sources including the world's religions, humanist teachings and the words and deeds of prophetic men and women.

Valerie Nielsen, a 71-year-old former teacher in Stoney Creek, Ont., spent most of her life in the United Church before joining a Unitarian congregation 15 years ago. Nielsen was married to a United Church minister, earned her master of religious education at Emmanuel College in Toronto and served as a staff associate with two United Church congregations. She left in the mid-1990s because of those who resisted the ordination of gay and lesbian ministers and still viewed God as male. "There were also some patronizing attitudes to me as a woman employed in the clergy," she says.

While Nielsen admits to missing "some elements of the United Church and remnants of Christianity that are still deeply part of me," what she doesn't miss is theology "that says we must crawl on our bellies and repent. I need something more life-affirming and joyful than that."

The story is much the same for Norma Drosdowech, who was an active member of two United Church congregations in Winnipeg from the time she was a child until she left for a Unitarian congregation in 1992 at age 56 because of the lingering resistance to ordaining gay and lesbian ministers.

But even before the sexuality controversy, Drosdowech had her doubts. "I often felt I was not a good person because I didn't believe in heaven, the nativity story or the resurrection," says the 74-year-old. "People assumed I was a devout believer, but I was struggling all the time." Drosdowech says she might still be in the United Church today if she had been part of a congregation with a more liberal interpretation of theology. "What was presented from the pulpit was considered absolute; the party line. No one ever talked about the idea of the resurrection as a metaphor."

Of course, United Church theology is hard to define and ranges from very conservative to very liberal. In fact, in some cases you'd be hard pressed to tell the difference between a Unitarian congregation and a United Church one.

That's certainly true at West Hill United in Scarborough, Ont., served by Rev. Gretta Vosper, author of *With or Without God*. Her book argues that churches should transform into spiritual centres that welcome people of all faiths and views for the purpose of strengthening communal bonds, allowing for personal growth and advocating for social justice. Sounds a lot like Unitarian Universalism.

"Actually, what has been taught in our liberal seminaries for decades is pretty much in keeping with the Unitarian doctrine. If we start applying that in our worship services, that divide between us and them would pretty much disappear." Should a merger between the two be considered? "I don't think that would be a bad thing at all," says Vosper.

Not everyone thinks that's a good thing. Rev. Harry Oussoren, who recently retired as executive minister of the congregational, educational and community ministries unit of the United Church's General Council, says Jesus reveals what God is about, and without such a central figure, Unitarians lack "a coherent vision" of what draws them together. "What I find is lost when we move to Unitarian Universalism is a recognition that there is a transcendent dimension to life that we usually summarize as God."

Felicia Urbanski, a Unitarian minister in London, Ont., cautions United Church folk against "throwing the baby out with the bathwater as I'm afraid too many of our Unitarian congregations have chosen to do." The baby, of course, is Jesus.

Urbanski says her preaching often feels "straitjacketed" by a dictum not to be too Bible-based. "I have to be careful of not using too much God language. I have to be careful of not quoting the Bible without quoting a whole bunch of other sources. I can't 'shove Jesus down people's throats,'" she says. "That's the critique I've gotten in my evaluations. It leaves me with a lot of emptiness. I can't even enjoy Christmas and Easter in my own church."


Because of this, Urbanski has decided her ministry would be better put to use in the United Church. She has spent the past three years working toward becoming a full-fledged United Church minister. "While I can respect the choice of people who are moving from the United Church to Unitarian Universalism, I wonder if they are aware of the richness that they are leaving for a small, struggling religious organization," she says. "The Unitarians say they embrace the values of Jesus without the theology of Jesus, but I think they are missing the



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kernel of that story, the biblical narrative that is so powerful. It's certainly a guidepost that I'm missing."

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JJ Mastandrea · 1 week ago

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Great insight

Recently I have become aquainted with the Rev. Shawn Newton of FIrst Unitarian in Toronto. I noted to Shawn that 200 years ago the Unitarians were at a place in the faith journey where some United Church are today. Shawn commented that the Unitarian Church is experiencing it's own reform.

They are re-introducing the Nativity Pageant as a symbol at Christmas. There is also the addition of Vestments and liturgical symbols such as antependium, candles and close attention to the liturgical year. Perhaps we can learn from each other.

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CONTACT THE OBSERVER

Address all correspondence to:
478 Huron Street
Toronto, Ontario M5R 2R3
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Administrative Assistant: Marilou Manansala

Maureen Werner
478 Huron Street
Toronto, Ontario M5R 2R3
(416) 960-8500
(416) 960-8477 Fax
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