

# Individuality in the Community

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For many of the ideas in this article, I have drawn on Phillip Hewett's Unitarians in Canada, second edition, published by the Canadian Unitarian Council, 1995.

Many religious communities thrive on the basis of shared beliefs among their members. In the absence of shared beliefs tension and conflict are common. The Unitarian's fourth principle, "[We affirm and promote] a free and responsible search for truth and meaning" places the authority for what we believe in the hands of the individual. While wisdom from the world's religions, Jewish and Christian teachings and words of prophetic women and men can form the basis for an individual's beliefs, in Unitarianism, these sources are not seen as The Authority on truth. Other sources of belief include direct experience of mystery and wonder and humanistic teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science. In Unitarianism, authority is found in the reason and conscience of the individual.

*The best way to characterize our denomination these days is that it is a church without a creedal requirement. This means that we welcome a diversity of approaches toward the formulation of answers to the large questions concerning the meaning of life, the nature of reality, the sacred, transcendence, and death. (From the Unitarian Congregation of Niagara [UCN] website)*

Throughout their history, Unitarian congregations have had to confront the tensions that emerge between individuality and community. Building community life on the basis of absolute respect for individuality is challenging. "Unity in Diversity" is a major aspect of Unitarianism. The unity is found in the process; diversity in the product.

Along with the tension between individuality and community, is the tension between freedom and order. In its extreme, valuing of freedom is sometimes expressed as complete rejection of any rules or organizational structure. But freedom is itself endangered when there is no social order to maintain it. This tension is not unlike those in the political arena when trying to make democracy work. Phillip Hewett notes that Unitarianism has been called the expression of the democratic spirit in religion.

A third tension in Unitarianism is that between tolerance on the one hand and conviction on the other. When one holds strong beliefs, especially religious beliefs, tolerance of opposing beliefs can be difficult. Tolerance

cannot be interpreted to dignify unreasoned prejudices. Beliefs which involve prejudice against minorities and support cruelty and punishment cannot be tolerated. Hewett notes that the successful position is openness to change or "open-minded certainty". The person who takes Unitarianism seriously accepts that her/his beliefs may have to be modified in the light of advancing knowledge -- much like the scientist's working hypothesis.

Attempts to resolve the above tensions are expressed in descriptions of our faith such as the following:

*We believe that it is our duty, as well as our privilege, to form a loving community, not because we happen to believe the same things, but exactly because we respect one another in our individuality and diversity. We do not think that the institution of the church is the repository of final answers to our questions; it is, rather, a fellowship of seekers, who enjoy sharing their respective individual journeys toward deepening our understanding and insights, as well as refining our feeling responses to the beauty, mystery, and challenges of life. From the UCN website <<http://www.unitarian-stcatharines.org>>.*

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