

Elizabeth Slade, chief officer of the Unitarian General Assembly offers her 'View from the crow's nest' for 2024

Our faith is needed

I recently read back some notes from my first couple of months in the job, back in 2019. I'd been to listen to Rowan Williams, former archbishop of Canterbury, give a talk. One thing I'd noted was his response to a question about the uncertain future of the Church of England. He said, 'Don't ask, "How do we survive?" but, "How do we express our commitment to those around us?"'

It felt like a useful framing for our much smaller denomination too. When I listen to people talk about changes in church attendance, I sometimes hear the story 'nobody wants to go to church any more'. It's understandable. The overall number of people coming to our churches has fallen consistently over the last few decades, just like many other denominations in Britain. The last census showed that nearly 40% of the population describe themselves as nonreligious, so the 'nobody wants to go to church' story *could* seem very reasonable.

But what if we were to ask: do people want to be part of a loving community? Do they want to feel part of something greater than themselves? To find a place they can belong just as they are, whatever their background, beliefs, sexuality, and where they can discover aspects of themselves that they didn't know were there? Would they wish to learn from the best of humanity's wisdom, and from the people around them, and from the earth? Are they yearning for something transcendent, outside of the secular day to day? Do they want to be in service to their community – and to engage with the world with all of their senses, the emotional and mystic as well as the intellectual and rational? To be in a place where they can safely ask life's big questions?

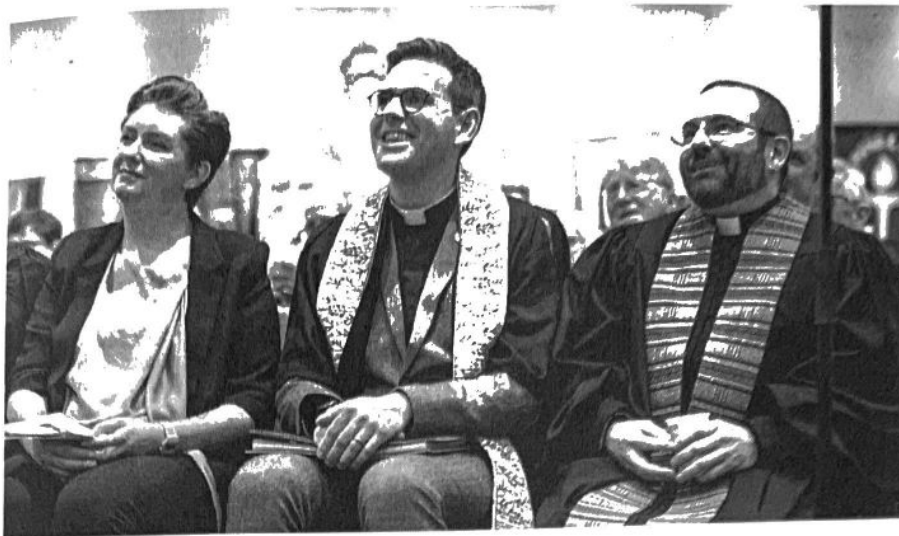
In an increasingly uncertain and crazy-making world, do they want to find an island of coherence? To be alongside

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others who are committed to making a better world? Do they want regular opportunities for meaning and connection – something woven into their everyday life, not just occasional special events? And do they want to know that their own development serves the wider collective, is not just individualistic? It feels like most people I meet are hankering after those things – though it often takes a little conversation to uncover their longing. Our culture doesn't normalise the naming of these deeper desires. And,

they can be invisible – especially for people who haven't been part of a faith community. To share my experience of this: despite growing up in a Christian family, I didn't know what I was missing out on as a young adult without a faith. I wasn't aware that I was neglecting my spiritual life, because I didn't know I could have one. Slowly, slowly, more and more doors opened. The 'me' that first stepped through the doors of a Unitarian church would either laugh or be horrified that for me, now, a Bible study group is one of the most nourishing things in my diary.

As well as meeting people who are hungry for spiritual community themselves, I'm seeing ever more people recognise that those are the things that are necessary for a healthy society and balanced ecosystem. More people are seeing the wider cost of a secular, individualistic culture. So how do we square this? Fewer people identify as religious, most of our chapels aren't seeing a steady stream of



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Shown left: (l-r) Elizabeth Slade and the Revs Rory Castle Jones and Ant Howe at the GA Anniversary Service. Photo by Aaron Scott Richards ©

new members, but the underlying questions and purposes of what we've always been doing are resonating with people's lives. And they have never been more needed, more vital. So what steps might we take (to borrow that phrase from Rowan Williams) to express our commitment to those around us?

I have sometimes heard our minister in East Anglia, the Rev Matthew Smith, ask the question – what he calls a Unitarian ‘koan’ – ‘If everything needs to change, what needs to stay the same?’

An image I have found useful in thinking about our tradition is that of yeast and bread-making. Our congregations are all making their own different kinds of loaves of bread – all using slightly different recipes, and shaping the loaves to their own unique style.

And then our ethos or theology is the yeast. We are using the same strain of yeast culture to make all these different kinds of loaves – and it's the same living yeast culture that Unitarians through history have been cultivating.

I think the General Assembly's charitable Object gives a good framing for what that yeast culture is: ‘to promote a free and inquiring religion’. In answer to Matthew Smith's question, the yeast culture is what needs to stay the same – our practice of free and inquiring religion – while the style of the loaves can keep changing in order to best feed the hungry.

It's not one-size-fits-all

So how do we know what kind of bread to make? (For those of you who have lost the thread of this analogy – I'm saying, ‘How do we know what kind of church to make, with this living culture of a free and inquiring religion.’) When we try to preserve the loaves of bread instead of the yeast, we can get stuck. Styles of loaf will come and go, and we must let them. If you want to feed the hungry, and you have a live strain of yeast, there is no limit to the things you can make with it – if you really want to put bread in people's hands.

We at the GA can't tell you what the right thing is for your congregation. We can never know as well as you can what your community needs, or what you love. If I sat down with you and listened to you talk about those things, there is nothing I love more than helping you see what you might do. But there are no generic one-size-fits-all plans and recipes that work everywhere.

But what we can all do is listen, and pay attention.

We can listen to the needs of the community around us, particularly people less powerful than us. We listen to people younger than us, and to the wisdom of elders. We listen quietly inside ourselves. We listen to the people who seem to be holding a vision or who have a calling. I think they're easy to spot when we listen well. And then we let ourselves be inspired.

Time to grow, time to let go

We let the steps we take be shaped by inspiration – putting down our usual to-do list, if needs be. We listen, and let ourselves be inspired, and we make the bread that we see is needed.

It is our identity, our heritage and our future to adapt with the times, to be an evolving faith. Sometimes I hear, ‘We know we need to change but we don't know how’.

But I also hear from people who are brimming over with ideas and just need a little trust and encouragement that will help them put things into action. Listening to each other and trying out small things together helps us to build the trust and confidence to try more.

And we can see examples all across the country of where this is happening – where a congregation has supported someone in taking a leap, and joyful, important things happen as a result, large and small, creating the spaces to welcome people into belonging and transformation, from which we can put our values into action in the world around us.

In the listening, there is also the careful balance of hearing what is ready to grow and what it's time to let go of.

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Linda Craig spoke at the annual meetings. She is a Quaker working on a project called 'The Decelerator', (<https://decelerator.org.uk>) which acknowledges that while it's easy to celebrate the birth of new initiatives or organisations, and there are plenty of 'accelerator' programmes to support them, there is little support for those who lead organisations that are at a crossroads, or at the end of their natural lifecycle. Often these endings are ways of working that are no longer truly serving their purpose, and are trying to use energy that has moved on from where it was when the initiative was started. For example, many of our governance structures were designed when there were many more volunteers available to make them work. If we don't let them shift, we risk putting more energy into tending the bread oven than in checking that we're baking the bread we need. (Congregations can access support from The Decelerator. Contact Essex Hall for information.)

Fewer pairs of hands

Ten years ago, the Executive Committee had a target of a 20% increase in quota membership. Since then, it has instead dropped by 30%. No doubt it would have dropped more if it weren't for the brilliant and committed ministers, staff, volunteers who have been showing up with thought and care across our movement. It's a sign of the times we're in.

With there being fewer people to do the work that is needed – locally and nationally – it's important that we adapt the ways we work, to reflect that right now we have 30% fewer pairs of hands among us than a decade ago. If we don't adapt, it's almost inevitable that we do things badly, or burn people out. And when any of us is too busy and frazzled, it's hard to embody an inspiring vision of Unitarianism in action.

So we need to cut our coat according to our cloth, as the saying goes.

This doesn't mean giving up on the things that matter to us – quite the opposite. It means focusing on what's really at the heart of things, listening well, and letting things come to an end, or change, so that our energies are focused on the things that matter most.

Working together on things that matter

We will rarely know what the right answers are in advance. But we can practise a culture of trying and learning – and sharing our learning with others.

The congregational support toolkit launched at the annual

meetings is designed not just to give access to useful resources but to be a focal point for collaborative learning. Again, the answers won't all come from the GA. I know there are creative minds all around the country who have insights to share about all sorts of things:

- How we maintain congregational independence with local collaboration.
- How we support new fellowships in forming.
- How we share our building spaces with local partners.
- How we work well with local schools.
- How we tell our story on social media.
- How we spot and nurture potential new worship leaders.

The number of people we count in our membership is much less important than the quality of relationships we have, and the strength of the fabric of our community. It's from strong relationships that we can make very beautiful and meaningful things happen – it's relationships that enable our leaders, in all the forms leadership takes in a movement like ours. And that's how our community gets strengthened, how our faith gets strengthened – working together on the things that matter.

The matched funding scheme we've been developing aims to give a helping hand to do more of this, to help you invest in local leaders. It's a financial boost, but also a path to walk alongside you and connect you with others as you develop what's needed in your area.

I feel proud of all the leaders in our midst, and the work of all kinds that is done to steward this evolving faith.

And we really are stewarding something valuable. Like many of you I'm sure, I never tire of seeing someone's face light up when they realise that a church like ours exists.

And our practices of continual discernment to find truth and wisdom have never been more needed than in today's divided and disorientating world.

We are living at a changeful point in history. Those coming after us are likely to need loaves of bread very different to the ones that have sustained us. Our work to keep our living culture bubbling and active is essential – not to preserve our heritage, but to feed the hungry.

And whatever changes around us, the work we will keep coming back to is love. As the writer Ursula Le Guin says, 'Love doesn't just sit there, like a stone, it has to be made, like bread; remade all the time, made new.'

Elizabeth Slade is chief officer of the Unitarian General Assembly.