

Sermon Delivered by Howard Hague  
at Essex Church, 1<sup>st</sup> June 2003

# The Unitarian Movement – a National Perspective

Our General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches consists of some 190 congregations and fellowships in Great Britain. These are divided up into 13 District Associations in England, 2 in Wales, and the Scottish Unitarian Association. In addition there are some 30 congregations belonging to the NSPCI - the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland, with which we have close links.

Even though our congregations are members of the General Assembly, they are legally and technically independent bodies, including our church here in Kensington. As you can imagine this can sometimes make planning and co-ordination difficult, and it has been not unknown in the recent past for a particular congregation to close down before the GA and even the local District Association knew anything about it.

So what does our General Assembly actually do? Well it supports local congregations by providing advice on legal, building and charity matters, it acts as a communications network, it provides resources and materials (for example for publicity and religious education), it represents us at the national and international level, it safeguards our assets and it raises funds. It comes together nationally at the annual meetings, which this year took place in Edinburgh about six weeks ago. Most people who attend these meetings find that they gain inspiration, for example by sharing worship with 400 other Unitarians from up and down the country, especially when most of our individual congregations and fellowships are so small. Next year's meetings will be in Chester in April, and I think all of us who have attended in the past would recommend it as an experience to anyone who is fairly new to the movement, or who has not been so involved nationally before.

However, not everything in the GA garden is rosy, as you will know if you keep an eye on *The Inquirer*, our fortnightly newspaper. Early in 2002 it became clear that our finances as a movement were in a serious state, and that unless action was taken quickly our capital investment funds would be exhausted within six years. The General Assembly Council, which is our supreme executive body, set up the Triennial Review Working Party, not only to look at finance but to review the operational and committee structure of the GA. It was called 'triennial' because our committees and indeed Council itself work on a three year cycle.. The TRWP reported in November 2002 and recommended that the GA's expenditure should be cut by ú56,000 a year, with some staff reductions. In addition they proposed a major revamp of the Assembly's structure, whereby the present 21 committees and panels would be replaced by four commissions (later increased to five). The first of these, the Administration Commission, is now up and running, and this itself replaces three former committees. Details of the other commissions are currently being worked out, and indeed this weekend's *Inquirer* includes a call for volunteers to join them. It is also envisaged that the GA Council will play a much greater role in terms of strategic planning and future vision for the movement. This is something that has been rather lacking in recent years. I personally would like to see the Assembly adopt a policy of trying to establish a Unitarian presence in every town of over 100,000 people, which sadly is not the case at present.

If all the above has been happening at the 'official' level in our movement, over the last year there has emerged another, parallel call for reform from the grassroots level, as it were. At the General Assembly meetings in Sheffield in April 2002, Rev David Usher presented his own analysis of our current malaise, and his own radical proposals for the future. Basically David believes that our major failing is a lack of leadership at the national level. He would get rid of our present structures altogether, all the committees, even the GA Council itself, and replace them with a nationally elected president and an elected five person Executive. Following on from this presentation David spoke to a number of smaller groups and events up and down the country. As a result of the meeting in Manchester, a new group called 'Renaissance' was set up to take these ideas forward. This group proposed a motion at this year's Assembly meetings in Edinburgh which, in an amended form, was passed by a 62% majority. This motion called for the setting up of a Task Force to develop proposals for a nationally elected leadership, and, being a democratic movement, this is now starting to happen.

I think it's fair to say that there was a pretty lively debate about this proposal in Edinburgh, with strong feelings on both sides. In recent weeks it has emerged that an anonymous donor is willing to fund an elected Presidency for ten years to the tune, I believe, of ú50,000 a year. While this is extremely generous in itself, I remain uneasy about such a large donation for such a single specific purpose. On the other hand it is true that donations are sometimes made in our movement for one particular aim, for example the current initiative to fund a Youth Officer post. Also I am not convinced that a lack of leadership at the national level is our major problem. Clearly we do need good leaders, but I would argue that we already have a paid national leader - not the GA president, which is admittedly rather a figure-head role, but our general secretary at Unitarian headquarters, who I think has given a real lead in recent years, as well as working very hard behind the scenes. One area where the movement

is clearly not succeeding very well in getting our message across to a wider audience. It is still the case, I believe, that there are many people out there who would be attracted by the Unitarian approach, if only they knew it existed.

Despite my reservations about the Renaissance motion, it was duly passed in Edinburgh and we now have to work with this new reality. Exactly four weeks ago I attended the annual conference of a group called the Foy Society with which I have been involved for many years, and which is sometimes described as a think-tank for the Unitarian movement. It was Foy which offered its slot at the Sheffield GA to David Usher so that he could present his ideas initially. We devoted our conference to a further consideration of the present move for reform. It quickly became clear in our discussions that if we are to have a nationally elected leadership then the actual system of election will be crucial. The present voting system at our annual meetings gives congregations one vote for each fifty members, our ministers one vote each, our affiliated societies one vote and associate members no vote. The Foy conference came down firmly for 'one member one vote' as the fairest system, a view we shall be presenting to the new Task Force in due course. However this system would not be as easy to implement as you might think because we do not have a national membership. It would put the onus on local congregations to be clear about who their members are, which may not be so straightforward as definitions and systems of membership vary greatly. It is therefore fitting that we at Kensington will be looking at this matter over the next few months. If a national election brought about a greater interest in the affairs of our General Assembly then it would certainly be no bad thing.

Finally I would like to return to the question of why we are not more successful as a movement in attracting new people. Again in this weekend's Inquirer, there is a letter entitled 'Re-evaluation of Unitarianism' and I would like to share some of this with you. The writer (Alan Oates from Coulsdon, Surrey) says:

"There is an enormous spiritual hunger in the Western world today, to which the plethora of books on New Age religion bears eloquent testimony. The millions who buy them... for the most part never go near a church. They see what the churches have to offer as irrelevant or unreal. Why, then, do we continue to model ourselves in many respects on the mainstream churches, now so obviously in decline? We need to discard the trappings of nineteenth century Nonconformity and address the spiritual needs of the young in the twenty-first century... What was good for our parents and grandparents has to give way to what will be adequate to today's needs if we are to survive."

I suspect many of us would have sympathy with these views. While it is important that we have the right systems of governance in place and an efficient national organisation, it is even more important that we are clear about what our message is for today's world, and that we are able to convey it successfully.

In the decades to come we are unlikely to have the financial resources to build new chapels from scratch, though perhaps we could explore the options of joint ownership with other liberal groups such as the Quakers. It is therefore likely that any new Unitarian causes will be fellowships without their own building. For some years I have felt that we should have a Unitarian presence in Milton Keynes, a relatively new city of some 200,000 inhabitants, with yet more to come according to government plans. What about the idea of a 'spiritual cafe' in the high street? Wouldn't that be a challenge for the future?