

**African Unitarianism a sermon by Rev. Brian J. Kiely  
Unitarian Church of Edmonton March 2, 2008**

What did the Congolese totem worshipper, the Kenyan Seventh Day Adventist and the Burundian Roman Catholic seminarian say to one another as they sat down for tea??

When did you become a Unitarian?

I offer that rather sad attempt at humour to make a point that Unitarianism in Africa is anything but uniform in history and tradition. Africa is a place that before European colonization was a collection of very local cultures, tribes and economies. There had been a few empires over the centuries, but for the most part religion, language, and government remained local. That history infuses the African continent today. Wars are often tribally and ethnically charged as are politics, dress and culture. Improved transportation and the explosion of mobile phone accessibility have started to expand the world view in many African countries, especially in the cities, but the ties of tradition are still strong. Faculty members began to see those differences at work among various groups of African Unitarians at the first sessions of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists Leadership Conference in Nairobi in February, 2008.

A couple of points of contrast were obvious. Unitarianism has been in South Africa since 1867 when a young Dutch Reformed minister turned his back on his church and preached the message of a loving – not wrathful- God. Our South African congregations are also culturally Caucasian and European.

The only other Unitarian group with historical roots is in Nigeria where the tradition dates from 1915. There, a black Anglican Bishop, a 'liberal and principled man' pulled away and began holding services in Yoruba, using native instruments and writing Yoruba hymns.

But Unitarianism in Burundi, Uganda, Congo and Kenya are pretty much brand new. In Bujumbura, Burundi, Fulgence Ndagijimana was a fallen away Catholic seminarian. He went to the World Wide Web and in 2003 found Unitarianism, made contact with an English minister, and on his advice gathered his own church. In a landlocked, utterly impoverished country, 15 years after a tribal war that paralleled the Rwandan genocide, it pays to be cautious with new and different things. Since 2004, Fulgence has quietly gathered a community of 25 like-minded people. Their growth is limited by several factors, one of them being a lack of French worship and program resources.

In English speaking Uganda, Mark Kiyamba also found us through the Internet. With no language barrier and relative peace in his nation, Mark has been able to gather a congregation of 150 in Kampala. But the Ugandan story is even more

remarkable. Seeing a need, yet having no resources, no space, and no teachers, they just went ahead and started a congregation and school for AIDS children in the countryside. Right now they have 50 members and 450 students. It boggles the mind.

Congo-Brazzaville is another French speaking country. Alaiin Yengue is an anthropologist. Unlike other African Unitarians he did not come from a Christian background, but from an animist tradition of ancient tribal religion. In 2005, he was waiting for his brother to get off work in a Brazzaville hotel one day when he fell into a conversation with an American gentleman. They talked about religion and there Alaiin learned about Unitarianism. The man suggested that with our liberal views and our acceptance of paganism, it might be a bridge from the old world to the new in Congo. Alaiin used the Internet (are we noticing a theme here?) and made connection with Jean-Claude Barbier the secretaire of the Assemblee fraternelle des Chetiens unitarienne in France. The group now meets regularly and is looking to grow.

By far the fastest growing Unitarian community is in Kenya. In fact, it is four main communities, but all owe their discovery of Unitarianism to Rev. Patrick Magara. Patrick is our only ordained minister in Kenya, although his ordination came from the Seventh Day Adventist tradition. He discovered Unitarianism in 2001 and soon convinced his congregation to follow him into his new faith. How he discovered us and the why of his conversion is a little murky. Like most Kenyans, English is Patrick's second, or perhaps third language. Sometimes this gets in the way of a meaningful conversation with him, but most of us who know him suspect that the language difficulties can sometimes be a convenience.

"Why did you become a Unitarian" earns a discourse on Unitarianism rather than the answer requested. Other awkward questions are similarly turned aside. That makes ICUU leaders a little suspicious. In the Christian missionary tradition in Asia, there was a category called 'rice Christians'. As long as the missionaries provided rice, they had congregations. When the rice dried up, the congregations disappeared. Some suspect that Mr. Magara is a 'rice Unitarian'. Certainly there are many requests for assistance coming from the Kenyan congregations. We can't help but wonder.

But we have to balance that suspicion against the very real need and the very real efforts he and his people have made to better the quality of life of his people, and the success he appears to have had in planting our liberal faith.

It's hard to pin down a firm number of Unitarians in Kenya, but it is certainly over 500 in four major groups. Five years ago there were none...Zero. They all learned our faith from him. Right now there is some tension between the more progressive and urbane groups and the more rural groups led firmly by Mr. Magara. They

seemed to make progress in coming together at our conference, and the ICUU is help fund conversation and reconciliation efforts. We will have to wait and see.

The growth is hard to ignore. Why so much growth so fast? Kenyan Unitarians are willing to spread the word of their faith. Some preach in market places. Some talk to groups from other churches. There are many cases where entire congregations have 'converted' to Unitarianism. And then there is the outreach of their community social programs and schools. Anyone can participate, but the WILL hear about our faith. No one is forced to convert, but all who come in contact with Kenyan Unitarians will learn something about us.

Good heavens! Conversion? Proselytizing? Unitarians doing that? Amazing!

But here's something worth thinking about: If their success continues, within a few years there will be more Unitarians in Kenya than there are in Germany, Canada or the UK. Wow!

And then there are the longer term efforts on behalf of the community.

Before the conference, Patrick kept inviting us to come to Kisii, a place close to the worst of January's post-election violence. "No, no!" he would say, "Kisii is safe." It was hard to believe. But then we arrived and learned that for years Rev. Magara and others have travelled around Kisii province speaking to people and groups in conflict. They are peace-makers. When the region went up in flames, that groundwork helped preserve the local peace. Kisii really was pretty safe.

How to live our Unitarian Universalist faith into our daily lives is a challenge facing many in the developed world. We may tend to do constructive work to better society, but we seldom fly a church banner when we do so. In Kenya that separation of faith and living is literally unthinkable. Ask the Kenyan Unitarians about their church and they won't talk about worship or membership numbers. Instead they will tell you about their projects: the women's groups, the working cooperatives, the AIDS orphanages, the volunteer-run schools. To be a Unitarian there is to be involved in the community in a faithful way. Last week I mentioned Cyrus Itare. He is a young man in his 20's. He and his wife have a one month old child. Cyrus is unemployed (not unusual around there and not a shameful thing.) He and his wife have taken in *eight* orphan children into their tiny home. I am in awe.

Patrick's wife Alice Magara is an inexhaustible bundle of energy and the closes thing I have seen to an irresistible force. She runs the Kisii women's groups and plays a lead role in the AIDS orphans program. The word 'No' barely slows her down.

Closer to Nairobi are two other groups, one in rural Ruai and one in the city. The Ruai group week in and week out feed 100 schoolchildren a hot lunch. And right

now both groups are helping support some of the more than 400,000 people displaced by January's violence.

Let me stress something here. I am not personally feeling guilty nor am I trying to engender that in you. Nor do I think, are the African Unitarians. They do what they do because their faith and their culture call them to do these acts of radical neighbourliness. They do it because in the face of the crises of AIDS, poverty, war and whatever else, it is impossible to remain aloof and distant. There is safety in neighbourliness, because the person you save today might save you next week or next month. And, of course, it's the right thing to do. Sure, they ask us for help. Why shouldn't they? We have money. They don't. In their understanding of neighbourliness, this is not greed, it's community.

So Unitarianism in Africa is developing as a social and community based faith. Churches are more important for what they do than for what they think. Faith is a thing to be demonstrated in action. We in North America tend to think of our church as a place where like-minded people come together to think and explore, to seek answers and find moral support. That is fine and noble and suited to our culture and our time. But to state the obvious, Africa is not Canada. African Unitarians expect their church to be a place ... Well, no, they don't necessarily expect it to be a place. Church often happens under shady trees. They expect church to be a community where people tied by kinship, proximity and shared need come together to find strength, hope in prayer, work opportunities and practical support like food and clothing. The church needs to function as a social service agency first and as spiritual home second.

It's no surprise then that African UU 'ministers' are almost all lay leaders. The Kenyans have no training beyond that gleaned from monthly meetings with Rev. Magara. Leaders in other countries may have taken a course or two here and there, but nothing equivalent to a professional standard. Their need for education is high. That was the purpose of the Kenyan conference. Our job was to provide information and to open minds beyond the limits of local tradition and the village church.

We began with definitions of religious terms. Many were surprised, for example, that there could be different ways of understanding words like 'faith', 'god' and even 'religion'. One session covered Unitarian history and theology. Another explored conflict resolution. We held a discussion of worship practices that raised awareness of the immense variety in worship around the world and across Africa. My role was to discuss different kinds of church structure, locally and nationally.

The programs were content-rich, but with a lot of room for discussion. The excellent and focused questions from participants suggested that they were hungry for such information.

I did not speak for long. Instead I asked people to talk amongst themselves about how structure impacted their communities. And then we had an open conversation. That's when it got very deep. Two main issues emerged. The first was the obvious struggle of social context. Wars, poverty, AIDS, these are the soil in which our religion is finding root. You have seen a little of how they approach these challenges.

The second issue is also deeply felt. Unitarianism is a new kind of religious thought in most of Africa. But African is a collection of cultures where elders are revered and given an extraordinary amount of power. That's quite different where democracy and the power of ideas hold sway. Perhaps half of the tension-laden conversation dealt with how to build something new in a place where 'new' is often resisted. It is a painful issue for the young ministers who are torn by their inbred respect for elders, and their passion for moving ahead with the new ideas associated with this bold religious adventure. For them it's not just a matter of making change. They must find loving answers for a difficult situation. Right now the ICUU is working to bring the various Kenyan groups together in a facilitated conversation. The goal is a unified national Kenyan UU organization.

The best we could offer at the time was a North American analogy about the equality of women in our movement. In the 1970's, UU women came together and in gentle ways and harsh, demanded their place at the table. That place was given grudgingly at first, but in time a new generation of 'elder' males grew up as supporters of women's full equality, and the struggles eased. We suggested that the people in the room were the elders in training. When their time comes to assume that role, perhaps they will be the ones to share power.

Well, these are preliminary observations from someone who has had a first and delicious taste of African Unitarianism. My own understanding barely scratches the surface, but I hope I have made a couple of things clear: Unitarianism in Africa is not a single thing. It is mostly a recent planting in several diverse soils. Some very interesting things are growing, but at best they are the shoots of a new religion. What, if anything, may be harvested decades from now is anyone's guess.

Second, African Unitarianism is not a postcard of smiling faces making the best of a hard world. There are conflicts over power and right interpretations of the faith, and conflicts over the use of scarce resources. But in that way, they are probably most like their North American counterparts. For now, they are like newcomers to our churches who love what they see, but who do not yet have a good grasp of the history and the issues that comprise the dimensions of our faith. But they bring excitement and a new way of doing things that will no doubt change the face of our faith in the decades to come.