

**“We are the ones we have been waiting for...”**  
**A sermon for the CUC Western Regional Fall Gathering**  
**Unitarian Church of Edmonton, October 16, 2011**  
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*We are the ones we have been waiting for...*

Unitarianism is a funny religion, really. Some people won't even call it a religion, including a few who proudly call themselves Unitarian. I bet there are some in this room today who think that way – and that's okay.

We don't have a unified idea of God, a set of required beliefs, laws in any real sense of the word, or answers about where we come from when we're born, where we go when we die. And we don't promise salvation. Not much of a religion, eh?

Yet we're here today, gathered from all over western Canada. And in one broad sense of the word we have been 'here' for nearly 500 years, never in huge numbers, but always here, on the liberal edge of religion standing up for what we believe.

It seems that there is a segment of the population – of any population on earth – that is dissatisfied with the pat answers to the big questions that they receive from their tribe. Such folks hang around the edges, sometimes angry, sometimes longing to belong, but unable to commit to what tradition offers because they won't spout doctrines they cannot believe. We won't spout answers we cannot comfortably believe.

So we hang around and we wait...for what? An idea? Perhaps. For something that triggers an emotional response? Perhaps, more likely. Or maybe we wait for a person, for a some one to inspire us. Maybe that person is a formal leader in a public setting, or maybe that person is a neighbour or friend who says something that makes us feel less isolated and alone. We hear their words and we start to tingle...to say, "You know, that's me! That's what I think!" And miracle of miracles, we realize that out there on the edge we aren't really so alone or so strange, or condemned to eternal punishment reserved for unbelievers after all.

We are all waiting for someone. A savior? Not really. Most of us have already examined and let go of that idea. We are waiting for another fully human being or even several, who think like we do. We are waiting for a chance to explore and express our ideas freely and without fear. And we are waiting for that setting – that community - where we can feel valued, and appreciated and safe. And here we are.

*We are the ones we have been waiting for...*

In 1525 a young Spanish lawyer, physician and theologian wrote a book. All he did was point out, accurately, that the Trinity is not mentioned in the Bible. Now **Michael Servetus** was a stubborn, headstrong and courageous man. He escaped the death penalty imposed by the French Inquisition and laid low for many years making medical advances. But the pull of his theological beliefs was too strong. In 1553 he went to Geneva to see the dour reformer John Calvin who promptly had him arrested, tried and burned alive at the stake. The anniversary of that execution is just 11 days away.

Michael Servetus challenged orthodoxy for us and he did it alone, without a community of support. He had the courage of his convictions – to say it politely – or enough sheer egotistical cussedness to stick by his beliefs even unto a horrible death in the flames. And because of that, a debate began all over Europe as religious thinkers

clamoured for the right to believe, speak and write freely without fear of reprisal. The Toleration Debate would rage for two centuries.

**He was the one we were waiting for.**

That Toleration Debate made it to Transylvania at about the same time where it inspired a brave Bishop named **Francis David**, his young king, **John Sigismund** and Dowager **Queen Isabella**. Back then Transylvania was the gateway between the east – the Ottoman Empire, and the west, the Holy Roman Empire. It was a precarious place to be, in the no man's land between Muslim and Christian. They saw religious toleration as a critical tool for the survival of their nation and their culture, and so enacted the first freedom of religious belief law.

Many people say King John was murdered soon after in a supposed hunting accident. We know that Francis David died in prison at Deva years later. That landmark act would be repealed, but the bell of free religion could not be unring.

**They were the ones we were waiting for.**

In England, a couple of centuries later there came **John Murray**, a preacher of Universalism. He was a broken man. He'd been in debtor's prison, his wife and daughter had died probably because of that. He renounced his God and his calling and went to America in 1774 to make money.

Except that when he got there, there was this man who was waiting for someone. Thomas Potter was fed up with the hell and brimstone religion of a young America and had built a chapel on his New Jersey farm. He was patiently waiting for God to send him a preacher that he could stomach. The winds of the Atlantic, and perhaps of fate, blew John Murray's ship onto a sandbar near Thomas Potter's farm. Potter begged a reluctant Murray to preach in the chapel he had built, begged so persistently that Murray relented and preached. That day, John Murray rediscovered his faith and went on to set New England ablaze with Universalist fervor. He was the one Thomas Potter had been waiting for.

**He was the one we were waiting for.**

In Montreal, American and British Unitarians combined, uneasily in the decades after the American Revolution, to form a Unitarian Church. By 1843 they decided that they wanted a minister, but one side wouldn't accept a Yank and the other side nixed any Brit. Their compromise was an Irishman, **Rev. John Corder**. Corder was a natural leader, an outspoken activist with an impressive list of causes and accomplishments. He was an advocate for Confederation and improved treatment for the mentally ill. He advocated for women's rights, the abolition of slavery in the U.S. and many other causes. Yet in spite of his outspoken views, he built a congregation with strong ties to the business and political leaders of his day. He was also a controversial theological figure in largely Catholic Quebec claiming that, "the right of the individual to judge for himself must needs go before any statement of ... theology."

John Corder turned Unitarianism's precarious foothold in Montreal into a keystone congregation for Canada that soon sent missionaries to Toronto and spawned a national movement.

**He was the one we were waiting for.**

In the Toronto region lived a young mother and teacher with a dream. **Emily Jennings Stowe** learned homeopathic medicine in the country and longed to become a doctor. In 1865 Stowe was denied admission to the Toronto School of Medicine. The

Vice-President of the University of Toronto told her, "The doors of the University are not open to women and I trust they never will be." Stowe replied, "Then I will make it the business of my life to see that they will be opened, that women will have the same opportunities as men."

Stowe went to New York state and learned medicine there...and also learned about the women's suffrage movement. Back in Toronto she joined the Unitarian Church, became the first woman physician in Canada and a tireless worker for women's rights. She was attacked and challenged, but stood her ground, eventually opening the Women's Hospital still in operation today.

**She was the one we were waiting for.**

**Jennie McCain Peterson** was a founding member of the Unitarian Church of St. Paul, Minnesota, a community with a fair number of Icelandic folk. With the help of her minister, she began a kind of correspondence missionary ministry in the 1880's to the liberal Icelandic Lutherans who had settled in Manitoba. In particular she encouraged the lay preaching of Bjorn Petursson, a former member of the Icelandic Parliament. From their correspondence grew a friendship and later love. They were married in 1890 and Jennie moved to Winnipeg. With her husband, she opened the First Unitarian Church of Winnipeg in 1891 and she quickly became the loving and nurturing mother of the congregation. She led services, lectured from time to time and brought that special kind of caring leadership to the congregation that only certain people can provide.

**She was the one they had been waiting for.**

William Hardy Alexander was one of the founding members of this congregation in 1912, but not an original leader. Alexander was the first professor hired by the then new University of Alberta, and by all accounts one of its most popular. Alexander was gregarious, bright and tireless. He was also strong willed. He headed the committee that built our first church and soon became a powerful presence. Loyal to king and country, he engaged in a fight with the then minister Charles Potter over Sunday prayers offered for the war effort. Potter demurred...When Potter left in 1916, Alexander became the lay minister, a post he held in some capacity until 1930. It is fair to say, that he carried this church on his back, and even spent time helping the Calgary church during some difficult times in the 1920's.

Alexander's church closed in the mid-1930's after he had moved to California to teach, but some of its members helped refound this congregation in 1954, and some of the newer founding members helped start Westwood decades later.

Throughout western Canada, lay leaders like Alexander and the Peturssons were the foundation of Unitarianism.

**They were the ones we were waiting for.**

And now here we are. We have all found our way to this meeting place, to this congregation, this community this church, this movement, this faith, this religion.

*We are the ones we have been waiting for.*

When we have our joys and sorrows, when we need to think things through, when we need a place to bring our cries for justice when we need a place to teach our children values that are inclusive, spiritual and yet open and free, we are the ones we have been waiting for.

When we have need of a place to marry, to dedicate our children, to memorialize

our dead, we are the ones we have been waiting for.

Look at this single candle, this tiny tea light. Alone it is nothing, barely able to warm a hand, hardly enough to burn it. So fragile, so frail. But look at the strength that grows when one flame is joined with others.

All those people I mentioned would have had little impact without people to hear them, to work with them, to share the load with them. Had no one been waiting for them and their message, well we wouldn't be here today. You see it wasn't those historic figures who grew our tradition. They were just individuals like you and me, mere mortals with faults and failings, who happened to be in the right place and the right time and who decided that they were indeed the ones we had been waiting for and so they stepped up. But if others had not paid attention, had not seen value in their words and deeds, they would have been forgotten like millions and millions of other ancestors. That they are remembered, matters.

Unitarianism is small out here. Just nine congregations in an area roughly the size of Europe. But you know there are people who sympathize with our message. Stats Can tells us so census after census. There are far more people calling themselves Unitarian than are ever seen in our congregations.

We just have to make vital, welcoming communities they want to join. And that's a little bit the job of the ministers and it's a little bit the job of the fine DRE's and the youth leaders and a little bit the job of the CUC leaders and staff and of our excellent musicians and our administrators and our Presidents and congregational Boards... Those present day leaders certainly are ones we have been waiting for... Just ask your nominating committees about their degree of relief when some future leader says, "Yes," when asked.

We certainly do wait for those people to step up and lead, but like those figures of old, they cannot lead unless their leadership is supported by the rest of us. Support...that does not always mean agree with, but it might mean 'not undermine' their decisions and leadership.

You see we – and here I mean every single one of us –we are the ones we have been waiting for. The named leaders can only do so much to grow our communities. Growth won't happen unless people either get on board with reaching out and bringing people in or at the very least, allow others to do that work without interference. Strong and vital Unitarian communities, need good leaders, but they also need good members who believe in the mission and vision of the community and who pledge themselves to that mission and vision. We are the ones we have been waiting for. You are the ones your leaders have been waiting for.

There is only one real tried and true way to grow a religious community, one person at a time, one light at a time, one teensy tiny flame at a time.

So let's pause and think about your teensy tiny flame for a moment while we dim the lights and spread the light around the room. Watch how this whole room brightens as each new flame is kindled. Watch the light strengthen. (spread the light)

Now, take a moment and look at your flame... Now, please say with me just quietly..."We are the ones we have been waiting for."

Now say it with a bit more conviction....

Now turn and look at your neighbours and say with them, "We are the ones we have been waiting for."

Now carry that flame...not in your hand, but in your hearts pledging to be one of the ones we have been waiting for.