

## **Around the U and U World in 20 Minutes**

ICUU—10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Sermon - 2005

**Rev. Polly Guild, Minister Emerita, Follen Church, Lexington**

Ten years ago last March, a number of Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists gathered to share a dream. We dreamed of creating an international organization that would work for the growth and development of Unitarian, Universalist, and Unitarian Universalist congregations wherever they might be in the world. Representatives of 18 countries got together in Essex Massachusetts and a new organization, ICUU, was born: I see you too.

Some delegates represented the old and well established Unitarian denominations as in Transylvania and Hungary, England, Australia and India, while others came from brand new tiny groups like those just getting started in Russia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

While all of the invited groups have Unitarian or UU in their names, their theology and practices differ widely. This was soon apparent. While trying to write the Purposes of the organization into the new Constitution, a problem with the idea of God surfaced. Some people favored the use of the word God—others very definitely did not. To solve the problem, we posted on the board all the possible expressions we could think of for the idea of "God" and then we voted. The winner was "Spirit of Life" so the the ICUU statement of Purpose reads (in part) "We declare our purposes to be to serve the infinite Spirit of Life' etc etc. When Bishop Arpad Szabo of Transylvania was asked how he felt about that compromise, he replied, "It is OK with me, I'll just translate it GOD." The song Spirit of Life has been translated into many languages and is frequently sung in ICUU ceremonies. Hungarian, German, French, Spanish, Danish.

Over these ten years many volunteers have worked hard to make our liberal faith a source of inspiration, learning and spiritual growth for both emerging and existing U and U groups around the world.

Did you know that there are about 10,000 Unitarians who live in the Northeast corner of India? Do you know that they have been Unitarian for more than 100 years?

These Unitarians live in the Khasi Hills in the states of Assam and Meghalaya. They live in the foothills of the Himalayas. On my trip to visit them 2 years ago our plane from Delhi to Gauhati flew right past Mt. Everest.

This part of India is very different from the rest of India. It is way off the tourist track and there is not a postcard or a souvenir or a beggar to be found. These are mostly rural folk whose ancestors came from Cambodia via Burma and settled in this hilly area.

The Khasis are tribal people. They were not Hindu or Buddhist or Moslem as in most of India. Their religion was a nature centered tribal religion. They were always monotheistic with an indescribable Mother/Father God who was the creator of all things. This proved to be fertile

ground for the Welsh Presbyterian missionaries who came in the 1800s in great numbers with their grim Calvinistic hell/fire/damnation form of Christianity.

But our Unitarian story really begins with a Khasi man named Hajom Kissor Singh. He was born in 1865 at Cherrapunjee. (Cherrapunjee is "the wettest place on earth" and a place to which all visitors are taken. It is very beautiful. Looking down into Bangladesh you can see spectacular waterfalls.) Hajom Kissor Singh was second generation of educated Khasis. As the missionary schools were considered best, he not only got his education there, but he was also converted to their faith. Even as a child he showed interest in religious matters and his reading soon led him to asking questions about some aspects of Christianity. The idea of the trinity bothered him as Khasis believed in one God. He was looking for a religion more like the religion Jesus taught so he left the Calvinist faith. A friend suggested that he sounded a lot like a Unitarian and recommended that he get in touch with Boston and London Unitarians for more information. It was exactly what he was looking for. He was a Unitarian even before he knew the name. Hajom Kissor Singh spent the rest of his life walking over the hills establishing nearly 40 Unitarian congregations which are still there - many in very remote villages. The people are wonderfully warm, intelligent, and welcoming.

### **Here is another surprising story also from India.**

More than 200 years ago in India a young orphan boy was captured by Islamic traders and sold into slavery to a master who was boarding a ship for England. The name this boy adopted was William Roberts. When his master died, Roberts was freed and stayed on to serve the ship's captain. While he was in England he came to work in the home of a Unitarian family where he was taught to read and write English. He discovered in his master's library many books on Unitarianism which he eagerly devoured. When he was able to buy his passage back to his native India, he took with him a new religion. Roberts established a Unitarian congregation in Madras (Chennai) in 1795. The Unitarian church building was built there in 1825 and still stands today, in need of repair but active and functioning under the able leadership of Rev. Harrison Kingsley . William Roberts wrote these words that we should remember today: "if Unitarianism is worth believing, it must be worth propagating", and he did so, publishing more than 45 books on Unitarianism in the Tamil language before he died.

In contrast, barely 4 years ago a man in Finland was looking around on the internet and came across Unitarian Universalism. For him it was a truly great discovery. Here was a religion that actually made sense - one that both encouraged individuality and respected differences. Like Roberts, Aki Puli wanted to share his exciting find with friends and others in Helsinki. Now a small group is meeting regularly as part of the growing world wide community of Unitarian and Universalist congregations. They have become a member group of ICUU.

As you know, Unitarians and Universalists have never had much of a missionary spirit. Our congregations have never been solicited for funds to "save the heathen" or to spread "the good news". In fact when I was growing up as a Unitarian, we considered missionaries to be the very worst sort of culture destroyers; zealots who had no respect for native peoples and their indigenous religions. Although we were proud of our religion, its history, and especially famous Unitarians, very little has ever been done to share this faith either in the United States or abroad.

Today it is still just plain luck when someone encounters Unitarian Universalism and discovers that it is the religion that best expresses their own long held ideals and values. Everywhere there are Unitarians who have not yet discovered us - people who are "Unitarians without knowing it."

Such a person was Paulo Ereno, a teacher in Brazil. He encountered Unitarianism through his interest in Esperanto. After attending a Unitarian church in Cambridge, England, he wrote, "I confirm that there are indeed millions of Unitarians in Brazil - only they do not know they are Unitarians. Once I was one of them. When I was 16 I broke with the evangelical church... but I longed for the religion which as Voltaire put it, "would make men better without making them believers in the absurd." For many years I thought such a religion did not exist and that I was a freak - until I happened to find the Unitarian church."

All over the world, individuals and small groups of people are finding that this is a religion that does speak to their longing for a faith that makes sense. The long established Unitarian and UU congregations and the newly developing groups needed a way to connect and support each other so ICUU came into being.

As you can imagine, there is a wonderful and rich diversity in our UU world. Each group reflects and adapts to the culture in which it exists. As Rev. David Usher, first president of ICUU wrote; "We are not the MacDonaldis of the international religious scene. Our purpose is not to establish Unitarian franchises around the world with the golden arches turned up side down to form UU in which everything is uniformly and predictably the same." No, that is not our way. You would be amazed at the diversity represented by our international congregations but the basic idea of freedom from dogma and respect for the worth and dignity of all people are central everywhere.

At one committee meeting a couple of years ago a really serious disagreement surfaced. The Hungarian representative got very upset because some of us thought that Unitarian (and Universalist) should be listed as a separate denomination rather than grouped with other Christian denominations. While some do think of themselves as Christian, it is clear that others definitely do not. Anyway, a rather heated debate ensued. The next morning, the Rev. Cliff Reed, Unitarian minister in Ipswich, England, appeared with this poem.

### **The Christians Who Move On**

For the ICUU Exec Meeting in Weston April 19, 2002

We are the Christians who move on,  
Leaving behind what cannot be retained—  
The creeds written to cement a long dead empire;  
The justification for slavery, genocide and witch burning;  
The refusal to hear other people's truths;  
An idolized book;  
A man diminished to a god.

We leave these behind and move on-  
Not in arrogance,  
Not unaware of tradition's worth,

Not creating new bigotries as bad as the old ones.  
Or so we hope!

We move on—  
Carrying with us the free and timeless heart of Jesus,  
Faithful to what was said and done in love for liberty  
By him, by those who follow him,  
By those who give his spirit voice and flesh  
In every time and place.

We are the Christians who move on—  
Leaving even the name behind, maybe,  
A name that Jesus never knew.

We are the Christians who move on—  
Seeking and sharing the divine heart in everyone,  
As Jesus did.

The main purpose of ICUU is to build a network of support for scattered congregations large and small. Many are really very small all around the world. What better way to do this than to be connected to the World Wide Web? One of the first projects undertaken by ICUU was to provide the computers that are necessary to access this great communication tool. At the time that this was made a priority we had no idea that Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the WWW had become a Unitarian Universalist. It is truly amazing to be able to contact almost instantly the people in the Khasi Hills of India or the Unitarians Universalists on the Island of Negros Oriental in the Philippines - places where regular mail may take weeks or months to arrive - if ever. We are very grateful for e-mail and the World Wide Web. New people are finding out about this religion from the ICUU website. ICUU.net- look it up...

But, useful as it is, the www will never take the place of people actually meeting face to face so ICUU provides many opportunities for people to meet for Council meetings, leadership training, trips and study tours.

These programs bring together Unitarian and Universalists from different countries to learn from each other and share problems and possibilities and make plans for building the future. Let me tell you about a few more of our international congregations - both old and new so you can appreciate something of the great diversity we celebrate in our international connections.

After meeting Unitarian Universalists at a professional conference in the United States, a prominent Argentine psychologist has started a Unitarian Universalist congregation in her home town of Ushuaia on the island of Tierra del Fuego at the very southernmost point in South America - right on the edge of the Antarctic. Born and raised Catholic, Lilian Burlano is really excited about her new faith. She wrote, "Unitarianism is a religion of love, not fear;—true religious freedom leads to more authentic commitment." For her, Unitarian Universalism is a mentally healthy approach to matters of faith. She has even built an addition on her own home for a gathering place and meditation center. You may know about the Unitarian Universalist

church in the Philippines which was founded in 1954 as the Universalist Church of the Philippines by Rev. Toribio Quimada, a generous, peace loving man, who was murdered in 1988. One of the departments of their church that attracts new members is the Faith Healing Department. Amazingly, UU faith healers have incredible success curing chronic and supposedly terminal illness. Faith healing is an honest and effective part of UUCP. The proof is their high success rate and the fact that their ministers accept no money for their services.

The Unitarian Church in Prague in the Czech Republic was once the largest Unitarian congregation in the world. It was founded after world war one by Norbert Capek who is probably best known for introducing the Flower Communion service. Capek died at the Dachau Concentration Camp for his uncompromising beliefs. After the war the church struggled to survive the repressive communist regime. The good news is that the beautiful old building in the heart of Prague is starting to rebuild its image and its congregation. When I was last there the congregation was tiny but the current Prague minister is a young man who was educated in the US. It is my hope that he will succeed in restoring the congregation and bringing the church back to its former prominence.

Finally, let me tell you the amazing story of the Unitarian Universalists of Pakistan. In predominantly Moslem Pakistan there are a very few Christians... about 3%. The founder of the Unitarian Universalist church of Pakistan, Indirius Bhatti, had studied for the priesthood but became disillusioned. He was religiously troubled and searching. He found Unitarianism in a dictionary of religion. He was convinced that this was the religion that best expressed his own beliefs, especially that all people have worth and dignity. His is really a remarkable story of perseverance and dedication in the face of severe difficulties and real persecution. He has been disinherited by his family for being Unitarian but he persists. With the repressive blasphemy laws of Pakistan it is even very dangerous to be Unitarian. A person can be accused of blasphemy and be killed without any proof. I worry about him and his family. I have met him a couple of times and we have corresponded for years. He calls me his Mom. His children's art is posted on my fridge. To make a living for his family he has recently started an English Language Center which I help sponsor. I sincerely hope it will prosper.

These are just a few stories about our international family of faith and how ICUU is working to connect and strengthen the world wide network.

In April 2005, Pearl Greene Marbaniang, a teacher at a college in the Khasi Hills, went to the Philippine Unitarian Universalist 50th anniversary celebration as a representative of ICUU. This is part of the message he shared with them:

"Ours is a living faith that still speaks to people. It makes us realize how important our worldwide connections are—to the UUs we already know, and the ones we have not discovered yet. The ICUU brings together Unitarians and Universalists from many parts of the world: from the Phillipines and Nigeria, Transylvania, UK, Germany, South Africa, the US, Canada, India, among others. We come from different cultures, speak different languages, and express our spirituality in different ways.

Some of us come from economically strong countries, and some from struggling economies. Some of our groups are large, and some are very small. Building bridges is not easy work. It

requires patience, determination and thoughtfulness. We share a commitment to the use of reason and thought in religion, to tolerance for the faith of others, to personal conscience as the source of authority for our faith, and to responsible action as part of our religious commitment. At the ICUU, we come together as equal partners, bringing our different perspectives, our mutual concerns, our material gifts, as we are able, to achieve goals set by all of us together."

I think he expresses the mission of ICUU very well.

For a lot more information about The International Council of Unitarians and Universalists I hope you will visit the ICUU web site at [ICUU.net](http://ICUU.net). Spend some time there. Travel to the web sites of member groups. Check out the new adult curriculum which has lots of information about member congregations all over the world.

Become a FRIEND of ICUU. Consider coming to the 10th anniversary Council Meeting in Barcelona Spain next November. There you will meet wonderfully inspiring people who truly value this religious tradition of ours. Our international friends give us a whole new perspective on this faith we hold dear.

Despite these signs of growth, this is still a very small denomination world wide - less than a quarter of a million people altogether. But as Pierre Van Paassen wrote way back in 1946 when he became a Unitarian; "I am aware that the Unitarian Fellowship is not a powerful and wealthy organization when measured against the grandeur and worldly glory of certain ecclesiastical bodies, but I also know that a small flame can set an immense heap of wood on fire, and that most worthwhile things in life have always come from extremely small minorities."

That is the global challenge of liberal religion—to keep the flaming chalice of our faith burning ever more brightly in many places all around the world.

So be it. Amen