Shaping the Future

The Report of a Collaborative Inquiry

into the Future of

Unitarianism and Liberal Religion

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Introduction

Liberal Religion and the Future of Unitarianism

This document reports on the work of the collaborative inquiry into the future of liberal religion. The inquiry group consisted of eleven members. Most were drawn from Unitarian groups from across the UK but there was also a member of the Quaker community and a member of the Sea of Faith. The Unitarian element of the group was selected to offer the widest possible diversity in terms of: geographical location, age range, religious outlook, professional expertise, length of time in Unitarianism, and a 50:50 gender split, thus representing, as far as possible with a small group, the widest range of views available (i.e. following standard qualitative research practice). It was regretted that the necessity of achieving this range permitted the attendance of only one Unitarian Minister. However, that Minister was the Principal of Unitarian College Manchester and therefore was fullly aware of ministerial issues. The Inquiry was, however, predominantly concerned with the *grass-roots* perception of liberal religion and the future of Unitarianism.

The group met four times (for 24 hour periods) from October 2007 to March 2008 with research work undertaken by members between the meetings; there was interaction between participants and reflection to refine ideas. Good use was made of IT during these periods, together with a few small group meetings. The importance of the group meeting and communicating as a varied “congregation” of individuals was essential to the inquiry process. This had advantages and problems. The former required time to attend, travel, planning, commitment to work outside meetings and money - just the sort of congregational issues faced by many Unitarian congregations. The latter saw the group experiencing difficulties with the Yahoo! group but also positives in using the internet for research. However, all members of the group had e-mail access and used it; modelling the behaviour envisaged for the future!

A decision was taken early by the group to focus on the future of Unitarianism in the UK. It was felt that Unitarianism was sufficiently broad in its practice to exemplify most of the challenges facing liberal religion generally; and that the group felt most comfortable using the knowledge they had of Unitarianism rather than straying into areas where their knowledge was more limited. Nevertheless, the presence of a Quaker and a member of the Sea of Faith Network proved invaluable to the Unitarian members of the group in terms of reflexivity, and in raising challenging questions.

This report is laid out under six main headings:

1. Definitions
2. The Historical context
3. The current situation
4. Scenarios for development
5. Recommendations
6. Conclusions

1. Definitions

The group defined the core object of liberal religion as *"The pursuit of meaning by the individual in community with others."* The implicit nature of religious experience was seen as an essential ingredient in the process of the pursuit of meaning.

Liberal religion is creedless, draws on many sources and involves dialogue with others. It is better seen as process than as a religion with fixed truths. The liberal religious view crucially upholds the right of the individual to personal faith free of creed or dogma.

Liberal: Key values spring to mind: openness to change, new insights and "new light", free-thinking; there is not only freedom but also tolerance; it is non-dogmatic, valuing the experience of the individual; it focuses on ethics, not metaphysics; it is culturally aware and responsive.

Religion can be identified as a framework for spirituality and also a way of experiencing the spiritual. It is expressed best in communities offering support to individuals to explore their spirituality. Religion is one way to explore the meaning of life and that relationship with the bigger "Web of Life" of which we can become aware. It conjures up the word "Sacred".

Future: The group was also concerned with exploring the "future" of liberal religion. This highlights thoughts around Vision and a way forward. Is our purpose to be transformed to enable the spiritual unity of humanity? Development and sustainability are crucial in the context of a looming ecological catastrophe. Institutions will change and evolve so the future is also about the "now".

2.0 The Historical Context

2.1 Unitarianism

The Christian tradition of liberal religion began with the translation of the Bible into vernacular languages and it was out of this that Unitarianism was born. Access to the Bible unmediated by priests was the beginning of the process of individual discovery. Some Unitarians saw themselves as returning to the purer form of Christianity of the early Church before a state-supported dogma was imposed that reinforced institutions and order rather than freedom in its widest sense. The growth of scientific enquiry, the Industrial Revolution in Britain, and the social and institutional marginalisation of practitioners of liberal religion drove most further away from the Christian mainstream of essentially traditional belief. However, it is debatable whether Unitarians *today* regard the Bible as the main source of individual authority, and there is a rising tide of individual spirituality based on personal experience that influences Unitarianism.

The belief that Jesus was fully human, as distinct from being simultaneously fully human and fully divine as stated in the Definition of Chalcedon, placed 19th century Unitarianism apart from conventional Christianity. This distinction and the concentration on "doctrine-neutral" works in the world made Unitarianism an attractive alternative in a society where religious belief was still the norm and social reform still the province of the philanthropic individual or voluntary organisation rather than the state. Unitarians also drew on their nonconformist roots with an intense network of family connections across the country. They saw themselves as a distinct community.

Latterly Unitarianism has embraced a range of other religious practices from Earth-centred beliefs through eastern religion and feminist doctrines. Amongst non-Unitarians this has led to scepticism about the Christian nature of the community. Unitarian groups are often excluded from ecumenical groupings, but this is nothing new, and the increasingly evangelical nature of those groupings has led to unease among liberal Christian members. At the same time, multicultural exploration of religion is now turning once again to an emphasis on the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The reasons for multicultural exploration among Unitarians can reflect varieties of belief among individual members of congregations. The lack of a binding umbrella-style decision-making framework, and the fact that decision-making is with each local church rather than with the whole body, can be an idiosyncratic identifying factor to outsiders (although other denominations, such as the URC and Baptists, also have a large degree of congregational polity). Quakers are, perhaps, less likely to be excluded in this way at national level, because of their organisational decision-making, in spite of their non-creedal stance. But Quakers too can be excluded sometimes at local level, where a more parochial attitude can exist and an insistence on creedal statements may prevail.

In some Unitarian circles, it is now being debated as to whether or not Unitarianism has evolved into a new post-Christian religion although there is no consensus view on this, and congregations still value their Christian heritage. Unitarianism now has travelled a long way from its recognisably Christian origins though it contains within it a strong Christian influence. It speaks of itself as an **accepting** religion where beliefs may change according to new insight and

where the path towards a personal value system is an individual one but one best developed within a loving community.

2.2 Trends in religious practice in the UK

Religious practice, as measured by church/chapel attendance, grew through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – though not without massive evangelical effort. Non-conformist churches grew particularly strongly in the newly industrialising cities and Unitarianism was particularly strong in the North West, especially Manchester and Liverpool. Church attendance peaked before the First World War, was fairly stable until the end of the 1950s, and declined strongly and relentlessly thereafter.

The role of women in this is particularly striking. Women were (and still are) disproportionately important in attendance. It is as though women held together Christian religious observance until the 1960s and thereafter progressively abandoned it as a centre to their lives. This occurred at different rates in different sectors of the British Isles, but is now apparent in all areas.

While other religions in Britain have grown this has largely been on the back of immigration rather than conversion. Immigration has affected forms of Christianity also, of course, particularly in London. Nevertheless, the social networks and fabric of shared belief that underpinned Christianity, and hence most organised religion, in Britain have unravelled over the past fifty years and show no sign of being re-made. Britain is unusual, but not unique, in the degree to which this has happened. Even modern Ireland has seen sharp declines in Roman Catholic observance and practice and most of the other countries of Europe are experiencing the same declines, albeit in some cases starting later. Although there has been a resurgence in Christianity in the past two decades in Pentecostal and Evangelical Christianity in Britain, institutionalised Liberal Christianity has steadily declined since the 1970s, with Methodism offering a prime example. Thus Liberal Christianity has suffered decline on a greater scale than other sectors of Christianity. The question of why Liberal Christianity has failed to respond effectively to the issues of the latter part of the 20th century is a crucial consideration.

Unitarianism as an approach fits well with many current trends in society generally and religion/spirituality in particular (and a definite fixed creed does not fit in with those trends towards personalised religion). Thus it is an alternative to the increasingly dogmatic expression of Christianity to be found in Britain. It is exploratory, open to innovation, open to many sources of inspiration, has elements in its tradition able to connect with ecological issues and respond to the problem of fundamentalism.

However, Unitarianism as a set of organisations falls far short of the potential of Unitarianism as an approach. There is therefore little need to change the approach, but there is a very clear need to improve the way it is mediated within society. This would involve the critical appraisal of Unitarianism at all levels, and its ability to communicate meaningfully with the contemporary world.

3.0 The Current Situation

Liberal religion faces two broad challenges:

At the religious level:
- The rise in fundamentalism within the decline of religious observance generally (and therefore its proportionally greater influence)
- An overwhelmingly secular society albeit with some yearning for more spiritual engagement

At the societal level:
- The increasing globalisation of both economic and social challenges
- The challenge of a world now clearly interconnected at the environmental level

3.1 The religious challenge

It is very difficult to foresee a large increase in fundamentalist beliefs in British society as a whole. Among the religiously observant there is an increase in the numbers who are part of groups with fundamentalist beliefs but this is in the context of general decline. What concerned the group was more the view that the *influence* of fundamentalism was bound to grow. The influence of conservative Christian groups in the USA, the rise of the BJP in India and the influence of Wahabbism and Shi-ite fundamentalists in the Muslim world, were all part of the challenge facing Liberal religions. In the UK the challenge is one of ideas rather than numbers.

Given the nature of Unitarianism, absolute beliefs of any kind tend to provoke the "protest" response identified by Peter Hawkins as one of its characteristics, in his Essex Hall Lecture of 1998. This, allied with a view that the spiritual yearnings identified in secular society present an opportunity for a non-judgemental spirituality, led the group to the belief that there is an opportunity for Unitarianism to grow if only its special nature could be more generally understood.

There is, however, a barrier to this development. The nature of the fundamentalist debate tends to be about routes to salvation – an endpoint. Unitarianism lacks that endpoint. The group considered the question of whether the apparent eclecticism and lack of discipline in Unitarian spiritual practice is unsettling and undermining of its capacity to meet the fundamentalist challenge or the opportunity represented by the spiritual void.

So as to provide a framework for understanding how Unitarianism might develop the group looked at the functions that religion seems to have served historically and made an attempt to assess Unitarianism in relation to them.

The Ten Functions of Religion
(1) Explanation
(2) Justification
(3) Diagnosis
(4) Salvation
(5) Prescription

(6) Consolation
(7) Legitimation
(8) Validation
(9) Integration
(10) Inspiration

Looked at through these functional lenses, Unitarianism turns out to be an emotionally and intellectually **demanding** religion.

1) Its **explanations** are provisional and provided by science rather than definitive and internal to a dogmatic system of belief.

2) Its **justifications, diagnoses and salvation** are arrived at by a process of exploration rather than being provided by a system of belief.

3) Its **prescriptions** are drawn from a range of sources rather than one.

4) Its **consolations** are drawn from a view of the individual being part of a larger whole rather than one of individual salvation.

5) Its **validation, integration and inspiration** comes from exploring individual meaning in community with others.

6) It **legitimises** no specific order.

This may be why some of its forms are so traditional – professional ministry, the chapel, the church, the "hymn sandwich" (a programme of alternating hymns, prayers, readings, and address) style of worship, and the social community provide a familiar framework within which individual exploration can take place (or not). However, unlike in the 19th century, church-going is no longer commonplace among any section of society, and Unitarianism has no imperative belief (*cf* Jehovah's Witnesses) which could make it an exception from the societal rejection of church-going.

The role of **acceptance** (of those of any faith or none) might be the key to developing Unitarianism. However, it is currently a passive idea, and one which is tested every time someone new encounters a Unitarian group. The group's discussions never fully resolved the question of the limits of acceptance, nor how it could be turned from a passive practice into radical outreach, but a distinction was made between passive and active acceptance.

The distinction between passive acceptance and active acceptance can be described as follows:

Passive acceptance involves a kind of shoulder-shrugging relativism which treats a person's set of beliefs as simply a fact about that person - like the colour of their hair or their taste in music. Essentially it is an indifference to belief as such. If we were helping someone to choose a sport to pursue we might recommend some sports over others as being more suitable in view of the person's general level of health and their interests. However, we could never say that one sport was wrong or was intrinsically less valuable than another. Religious beliefs, in contrast, are different in that they involve making universal claims about the meaning and purpose of human life and the underlying structure of the universe (if any). Believers often make conflicting and contradictory claims

such that it is logically impossible for all their beliefs to be true at the same time. In fact it is precisely this feature that renders religious beliefs important. It matters what you believe as there are consequences following from getting it wrong. Examples would be: the belief that our individual lives are under the protection and guidance of a providential deity as opposed to the belief that chance rules the world and the only purpose is that which we ourselves give our lives; or the belief that we are reincarnated after death as opposed to the idea that we will enjoy no kind of life after death at all. Passive acceptance will take Unitarians no further into the future.

Active acceptance, in contrast, starts out by saying to people that they do not have to sign up to any specific belief in order to join and they won't be thrown out at some later date if they do not conform to the party line. However, what's on offer is the resources, support and challenge to enable them to think critically about their beliefs and continually to evaluate where they are in their lives. In many ways this is a lot more demanding than living by simple faith as one is always on a journey of discovery, never finding a comfortable port in which to anchor. This very lack of simplicity, however, can open up the possibility of positively welcoming a diversity of approaches, sources, and individual journeys, on the grounds that the truth about life, the universe (and everything) is complex and multi-faceted, and that is a cause for celebration.

A concern is that it could become just too easy for Unitarianism to offer only passive acceptance. This might suit those who are renegades from orthodox religions and looking for a comfortable place to continue feeling they are religious but without having to think too much about their cognitive dissonance. But it would spell death for the movement in the long run as no one with a genuine and serious passion for religious questions would find a home there.

Before Unitarianism can grow, the development of acceptance into a radical practice, shared widely in the community, seems a necessary pre-condition. The take-up of active acceptance within the global community would necessarily encourage (and be encouraged by) the take-up of acceptance of the liberal religious view, since there is a close similarity between the definitions of liberal religion and active acceptance. This synergy would enable substantial growth in Unitarianism/Liberal Religion.

Two groups in UK society which are potentially susceptible to the appeal of Unitarianism were identified: dissenters and seekers. **Dissenters**, those who are practitioners of other faiths (or of none) but have found the constraints, both intellectual and emotional, too much, were seen to be highly susceptible to the appeal of Unitarianism. This group has been a considerable source of new Unitarians in the past. It does not have to be large to have a significant effect on the size of the Unitarian community and on its influence.

The **Seekers** are a broad group of individuals exploring the spiritual dimension of life (perhaps for the first time) for whom Unitarians could offer a welcoming community within which they could do this safely and without rules about right and wrong beliefs. The quality of both the welcome and the experience is crucial to retaining these individuals.

Fundamentally, Unitarians must consider their own assumptions; particularly that the world needs what they have to offer. Is there spiritual hunger, are there large numbers looking, and does the organised religion they offer meet needs? The

group concluded that there *is* a need and that Unitarianism *can* offer an identifiable point of difference to other answers, but that provision varies.

3.2 The Societal challenges

While there are challenges still in our own society they are relative rather than the absolute challenges addressed by Unitarians in the nineteenth century - very few live in absolute poverty; some of our children may not be well educated but all have access to education; all have access to healthcare. However, there remain major problems of inequality within Britain, locally as well as nationally. Manchester (for example) has levels of poverty that remain shocking, and to say that challenges are relative is not to say they are not serious. New variations on old challenges constantly present themselves: inequality; civil liberties; violence; consumerism; alienation; and so on.

More pertinently for the future, however, the challenges facing those who are concerned with inequality are now global and the key environmental concerns are also global.

There are two issues facing Unitarians in the British Isles in addressing these challenges:

1. The **practical** one of whether the community is equipped at an organisational and resource level to make any significant difference to global issues.
2. The **religious** one of whether the definition of Unitarianism that has been adopted provides the right framework for addressing these issues.

Of the two the latter is probably the more important. If Unitarians have the spiritual framework and the religiously motivated people they will find ways, however inadequate, of addressing the issues. Unitarianism is now a private, individualised practice. Yet Unitarians also value the need to come together in community, providing opportunities to support each other and also reach out to the wider world, even if only locally. The recent report on “Unitarian Social Action at Work” concluded that much of the falling off of social responsibility work over the past forty-five years was due to lack of capacity rather than a diminution in social concern.

In this context it is likely that individual Unitarians will engage with the societal issues and the efforts of the Unitarian community as a whole should be strengthened and supported. Also the “think global, act local” is something that can and should be embraced. Also, however, there is a need for nationally organised action, considering not only charitable but also political issues. Joint social action through Churches Together should be encouraged.

4.0 Dimensions of Development

The challenge facing Unitarians is “Are we willing to change?” There is an apparent openness to change amongst many Unitarians but it must be recognised that change can be painful (though it can also be exhilarating, interesting, exciting, and even fun – perhaps the negative connotations of change need to be challenged). In many ways, despite the catastrophic fall in congregational numbers, there remains reticence. The “burning platform” that is required to provoke acceptance of change remains lukewarm. If there is no vision for the future, is there the “guiding coalition” to lead the movement into any future?

There is much common ground to move forward drawing upon Unitarian history and practice, for example: rituals, discipline, language and a proud tradition of good works. It is time to cherish that background while developing a future that will inevitably involve risk.

The group developed six potential scenarios for the way Unitarianism might develop in the UK. These are only separate conceptually and most of them have some history in the community; they should *not* be seen as mutually exclusive. The group saw development mainly as growth in numbers but also in the quality of experience in local and national settings. It did not develop scenarios based specifically on growth in influence, although that may follow growth in numbers.

4.1 No strategy for change

Business as usual, but the change that is inherent in Unitarianism continues. Its forms flourish or decay on their own merit.

The problem here, which has been recognised in all the initiatives taken by the community in the last twenty-five years, is one of critical mass. Once congregations fall below a certain number of active members the capability of the congregation to perform its functions begins to fail. Once the number of congregations falls below a certain level, first the District Associations and then the General Assembly itself begin to be unable to perform their support functions to failing congregations. While there are opposing views within the movement, one is that once the central organisation is gone any prospect for Unitarianism to have much of a voice disappears.

An alternative view is that this is an excessively organisational view of Unitarianism and that Unitarianism will survive without its organisational apparatus. However, “in community with others” is a central platform of Unitarian practice and even in today’s wired world it is difficult to see how this can be delivered well without direct human contact. There are local communities with both the financial and building resources to grow but which are slowly declining, which indicated to the group that this second view is unduly optimistic.

Overall, the group considered the strategy of “no change” as one that could see the demise of Unitarianism within a remarkably short time.

4.2 Congregational Development

The basis of development remains the local congregation. To grow, Unitarians need to construct strategies that show how this can be done and organise resources to support those best able to do it. Congregational development has been at the heart of actions to reinvigorate Unitarianism. Over recent decades there has been a host of initiatives and strategies, some of which have been successful, others less so.

Reflecting on this the group concluded that there is a tendency within the movement to forget past activities and then to "reinvent the wheel". This is surprising given the small numbers of leaders and needs to be countered by ensuring that such documents are readily available e.g. on the GA website.

The Task Force on the Governance of the General Assembly looked at congregational development and found that the role of leadership (ministerial and other) is key in growth, but:

- Very few communities are able to support full-time ministry from current giving
- Perhaps twenty are able to support full-time ministry from investments *and* current giving
- The rest of ministers are either part-time, shared, or supported by Districts, the Sustentation Fund, or both.

Since the Task Force Report the General Assembly has increased its access to funding for this sort of purpose but now confronts a shortage of potential ministers. Live giving is important because it is a sign of commitment within the congregation – growth is more likely to be achieved if it is broadly based and not simply delegated to the minister. Full-time leadership works because most communities are local – a local constant human presence gives life to the building, which is still the most visible manifestation of the Unitarian community.

Congregational Development was recognised as essential to the future of Unitarianism. Currently Unitarians provide, or aspire to provide, open-minded religious communities, although different congregations tend to cater for different groups. There are opportunities for individuals to interact but these can be limited. Therefore, there need to be more opportunities for sharing and activities in congregations. Despite an ageing membership and being grounded in history and buildings, congregations should be future-looking when it comes to issues, including global ones. It is an advantage that there is an infrastructure to cope with expansion.

The future offers opportunities to reinforce the "acting locally in a globalised world". Congregations need to get back to basics and cater for the individual and their spiritual quest. This requires a balance between community and the individual.

Unitarians need to accept that in today's culture there is a desire not to be labelled. Labels should be less important in the future to any definition of who belongs to the Unitarian movement. In many ways Unitarians need to dispense with the focus on membership; it needs to refocus on the individual contribution. There will be very different patterns of involvement. The current model is one of

the “ladder “ – attract attention – engage them – come to activities – come to chapel/church – sign-up – join the committee. In future, congregations should be more like networks where everyone is valued for their involvement and contribution, with strong and loose ties with the congregation and wider networks. All should be regarded as equally valid. People coming into contact with Unitarians will meet long-standing and new people; some people will stay on the fringes, others will get involved in particular activities; some will be encouraged to participate nationally. There is no right or wrong way to do Unitarianism!

Forms of worship will be important and should take many different forms. There have been tremendous changes over the past fifty years in Unitarian worship and services are designed to appeal to the whole person. The place of ritual (in its broad sense) in worship was recognised as crucial to experience. There is also the need to address the theory of how Unitarians come together as a religious community (ecclesiology) and whether this is through a process of belonging or a discovery of shared values; ideally, perhaps, a balance of both.

4.3 Portal development

Unitarians should treat every point of initial contact with the movement as an opportunity to introduce the individual to the full range of belief and practice. They should develop tools to make this possible and enlist each organisation to promote them. The online presence should reflect the diversity of the Unitarian network and be a simple entry point into the wider network.

The group agreed that there has to be a multi-level strategy including web sites **(clicks)** – with perhaps a portal to all the other Unitarian resources – and the established churches and other organisations **(bricks)** working in parallel. The group considered the strategy for Unitarian contact must include cyberspace. A portal could be a linking mechanism which all Unitarian organisations felt part of, and that everyone visiting their own particular website would be directed to in order to discover easily those resources and other activities that they were seeking. The portal in itself would be a means rather than an end (not a website in itself). Central to the portal would be words which are relevant to today’s world and attractive to people interested in individual, social, and organisational spirituality. Each individual website would be configured to demonstrate what their particular grouping could offer. Groups could be placed under a variety of headings, e.g. chapel, society, education, interfaith, and so on. The portal would provide easy cross-linking so that (for example) an individual congregation’s social action project would also be listed under social responsibility. This would give visibility to surfers as to the extent of what Unitarians do at a “click”, and where to find the “bricks”.

There also needs to be a strong emphasis on books and pamphlets. At present it is not as easy as it could be for enquirers to get information about the movement. The publications section on the website where short pamphlets and books can be downloaded should be made more user-friendly; an on-line bookshop is a must. In addition there should be podcasts and videos.

Some of these tools already exist. The most important of them is the GA website which has the potential to direct the enquirer to the most appropriate group within Unitarianism or the most appropriate source to learn more.

4.4 Promotion

4.41 Aggressively market ceremonies

It is necessary to build national networks of celebrants who will conduct non-religious namings, weddings and funerals, easily accessible and held on a national database. Experience suggests that the majority of people requesting these services are not dyed-in-the-wool atheists but those who have had no serious involvement with the Church throughout their lives and feel it is bogus to get a minister involved at the end. On the other hand people often want a bit of religion - say, a hymn and the Lord's Prayer, as a purely non-religious service feels a bit dry and religion does add some gravitas to the occasion. Humanist and Civil Ceremonies have problems in providing mix-and-match marriage services but Unitarianism, with its multiple flavours, is well positioned to provide completely bespoke services. In addition the organisation has buildings in which various services and receptions can be held; it has ministers who are official wedding registrars. There are leaflets in existence which explain Unitarian ceremonies and so everything is already in place. All that is needed is a more active pushing of the service to funeral directors and, perhaps, some recruitment of additional lay ministers who are trained to conduct these kinds of ceremonies. It is important that there is consistent cover for the whole country. It is an excellent way of getting brand recognition through these ceremonies. Having been to a Unitarian funeral, say, and discovering how open-textured it is as a religion, people may think to come along to Unitarian meetings to find out more. At the very least they may look it up on the web and through the website download some leaflets, watch some videos and buy some books.

However, this raises the question of where Unitarians stand on the question of ritual more generally, and debate needs to take place on the role of ritual in Unitarian theology.

4.42 Brand Recognition

One of the issues the group discussed was the problem that there is virtually no public recognition of Unitarianism in the marketplace. On the other hand, when you think about Quakers or Buddhism, you get a clear picture of what they are about because they each have characteristic practices that come to mind.

The **Unique Selling Point** of Unitarianism, the group decided, lay not in any particular practice but in the support it offers individuals in following their own spiritual path. It discussed the limits of what might be acceptable but didn't come to any hard and fast criteria. However, in a way, such a discussion is rather academic as the range of Unitarian beliefs is in practice by no means infinite (even though the rhetoric may sometimes lead one to think it is).

The benefit of Unitarianism may lie in its diversity but for many outside this may just look like vagueness and absence of commitment. Unitarians' personal spiritual journeys may draw from the Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Sufi, Earth Spirit, or other traditions. If Unitarians think that this is indeed a virtue, then spelling out what the diversity consists in would counteract the perception of absence of commitment.

4.5 The "meta" organisation

In addition to congregational growth, the future of the Unitarian movement lies in the development of those of its parts which are national or international. These need to be resourced to develop their own strategies. Few of these groups are likely to be capable of generating the resources both human and financial to generate their own growth. The community would have to decide where it was prepared to put its resources in the context of scarcity. All of them would have to subscribe to the notion of active acceptance and be open to those who did not necessarily belong.

4.6 The virtual organisation

The Unitarian movement will also need to make full use of the world wide web and its associated developments, as a complement to existing communities. Unitarians need to define the shape of its web presence and the resources needed to make it happen.

There are limits to the web as a meeting place as the group discovered itself in the course of its meetings. It seems unlikely that even for younger members of the community it would be enough by itself. Whatever the future of the web as the meeting place for Unitarians, its development is probably a necessary pre-condition for the growth of Unitarianism in the UK.

5.0 Recommendations

The following recommendations should be considered.

5.1 Social Action

The efforts of the Unitarian community as a whole should be strengthened and supported. Also the “think global, act local” is something that can and should be embraced. Also, however, there is a need for nationally organised action, considering not only charitable but also political issues. Joint social action through Churches Together should be encouraged.

5.2 Leadership

Full-time leadership works because most communities are local – a local constant human presence gives life to the building, which is still the most visible manifestation of the Unitarian community.

5.3 Networking

There need to be more opportunities for sharing and activities in congregations. There also need to be more opportunities for non-Unitarians to engage with congregations on a social basis, so that Unitarian congregations are part of the local scene.

Within the Unitarian Community it is recommended that:

1. Each congregation should investigate its connections with other local Unitarian congregations, the wider Unitarian movement, and wider liberal religious networks and build a relationship map

2. Each congregation should identify what needs to be done to engage more fully in wider arenas.

3. Opportunities should be created for exchange between congregations.

4. Nationally, a networking pack should be prepared – marketing material and templates to be adapted locally. Theme – “whichever church you walk into you are connected to a wider network that can support your spiritual development”. This should help each congregation to define its own “brand”.

5.4 Promotion and Growth

1. Each congregation should identify its own sponsors to lead growth and engagement with the Unitarian and wider liberal religious network e.g. minister, lay leaders (“change champions”).

2. Sharing of successes with each other should be encouraged, e.g. *The Inquirer* and *The Unitarian* could have a “good practice” section.

3. Unitarian magazines are too inward looking, rather than exploring the diversity of liberal religious ideas and activity that might interest non-card-carrying Unitarians. An additional publication should be considered.

4. Creative targets (metrics) to try and measure success should be unique to each congregation reflecting their particular circumstances.

5. Creative opportunities for worship outside of the Sunday am or pm should be explored.

6. The range of alternatives to formal worship should be explored e.g. meditation groups, retreats, congregational weekends, pilgrimages, shared meals.

7. There should be a national survey of recent members to identify why they joined and stay.

8. The GA could support these initiatives with a "handbook" on growth as an online resource.

9. A national database of celebrants who will conduct non-religious namings, weddings, and funerals should be established.

10. National Societies (e.g. Music Society, Meditational Fellowship) need to be promoted and such promotion needs to be resourced.

11. Live giving is important because it is a sign of commitment within the congregation – *financial* growth is more likely to be achieved if it is broadly based and not simply delegated to the minister.

5.5 World Wide Web Unitarianism

The group strongly emphasised that there also needs to be an intense focus on books and pamphlets as well as a web presence. The two approaches should be co-ordinated and integrated.

The GA website should be restructured to focus on people rather than the organisation.

There should be greater engagement with current events and controversial issues on the GA website.

Individual congregations and groups should receive help to produce their own unique websites with clear information about what they can offer.

At a purely organisational level the strategy for the development of Unitarianism is likely to be "bricks and clicks" – the simultaneous development of the local communities and the web.

Portal

To be successful in its objective the portal proposal requires that:

1. Its primary purpose is to be an initial point of contact.

2. All of the organised groups amongst Unitarians are prepared to link to the portal as a means of entering the wider community and all it has to offer.
3. The portal is promoted prominently at each of the churches and chapels and automatically included in any press release or public appearance by a Unitarian figure.

5.6 Communications

The aims for improved communications should be (in this order):
1. Simply to make the Unitarian view/approach available to people.
2. To take the view/approach out into a form that appears relevant to more people, particularly through engagement in current debates (e.g. about gay vicars, Creationism, the environment, etc, etc).
3. To help enable people within Unitarianism to discuss and develop their views.

The forms of communication Unitarians particularly need are –

- A quarterly magazine (or special issues of *The Inquirer*) geared principally to an external audience.
- A group of people organised to write letters to newspapers and contributions to on-line forums.
- Someone designated as national media spokesperson, "quoted" in press releases.
- Widely available leaflets in libraries and other public points of contact.
- Books - with an effort to get one introductory Unitarian book into specialist religious bookshops, although the group appreciated the efforts to do this and the problems faced.

6. Conclusions

The group's feeling was that institutionalised religion is currently in decline in the UK as part of the general process of secularisation, although there is a resulting opportunity to engage with the privatisation of religion. Also, organised liberal religion is declining more steeply than organised conservative religion, and the nature of privatised religion could therefore be expected to be more liberal. What the group was seeking was a way to halt and reverse the institutional decline by tapping into the reservoir of private spirituality - a "tipping point" in the language of Malcolm Gladwell's excellent book. Whilst there was a strong agreement that this was necessary, where individuals differed was on what would cause/constitute such a turning point, with suggestions including a powerful marketing effort, a change in the structure of the Unitarian movement, more co-operation within or between relevant groups and movements, or for some a return to, or a further move away from, Christian roots. Perhaps it will be a combination of some or all of these. Perhaps, indeed, the exact turning point is something that will only be determined by history, in retrospect, and until then the best we can do is continue "sowing our seeds", knowing that some will fall on stony ground, while others will grow and flourish, and we cannot know ahead of time which are which.

In many parts of this report suggestions have been made as to how the Unitarian Community can move forward. Underlying these suggestions is a clear belief that Liberal Religion has much to offer both the contemporary and future world; indeed, to go further, that the world *needs* Liberal Religion! It is therefore with a great sense of responsibility towards the Unitarian Community specifically that these suggestions are offered as ways forward.

The question of if and how these suggestions can be implemented rests beyond the competence of the Inquiry Group. Some require consideration and action at local/district level, while some are addressed to the national organisation. In particular, because this has been a grass-roots inquiry, the crucial question of leadership, by the professional ministry and others, in implementation of any suggestions has had to remain open.

However, the group has been able to offer pointers. These primarily concern communication; involvement in contemporary issues of concern, whether social, political, or global; and a spirituality that is based on active acceptance of the individual and his or her needs. Thus principles have been identified on which action can be based.

7.0 Resources

Many resources to assist with consideration of the issues raised in this report are available from The General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches at Essex Hall, 1-6 Essex Street, Strand, London WC1R 2HY.

7.1 Since this report was prepared, substantial work has been carried out on the Unitarian Internet presence:
Leaflets, Essex Hall Lectures, Publicity Material, and Guidelines & Reports, are now available from the Document Library (under *Congregational Support*) on the GA website at http://www.unitarian.org.uk

If your Congregation does not already have its own website, there is a template available from Essex Hall.

7.2 Books of Interest

For information on Statistical Trends, see:
Religious Trends 4, edited by Peter Brierley, a UK Christian Handbook published by Christian Research, Vision Building, 4 Footscray Road, London SE9 2TZ.

For further reading on Spirituality in Britain, see:
The Spiritual Revolution – why religion is giving way to spirituality, by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, published by Blackwell (2005)
The Spirituality Revolution – the emergence of contemporary spirituality, by David Tacey, published by the Routledge Group (2004)

For changes in the concept of religion in contemporary Britain, see:
Alternative Religions by Stephen J. Hunt, published by Ashgate (2003)
Redefining Christian Britain – post 1945 perspectives, by Jane Garnett et al, published by SCM Press (2006)

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