

**Church  
and  
Society**

**Some Unitarian views  
for discussion**

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## Church and Society

**Some  
Unitarian  
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discussion**

Edited by Alan Ruston  
and John Storer

The Social Service Department  
General Assembly of Unitarian  
and Free Christian Churches  
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## CONTENTS

Introduction	... ..	4
The Prophetic role of the Church:		
Rev. Dr. Verona Conway	... ..	5
Unitarianism and social action:		
Rev. N. J. Teape	... ..	9
Social Responsibility to our Neighbours:		
Rev. John Storer	... ..	15
Unitarian social mission now: an appraisal:		
Alan Ruston	... ..	23

## INTRODUCTION

THE PURPOSE of this booklet is to promote discussion among Unitarians who are not adverse to healthy and constructive argument. It is not intended to be a comprehensive guide to the social service and social action which may be undertaken by our members, nor has it sought to steer a middle course between extremes of opinions. The discussion prompters have been provided by the editors.

The booklet appears in time for congregations, fellowships, discussion groups, etc., to give attention to the subjects it raises well in advance of the General Assembly Meetings 1969, when a session will be given over to 'Church and Society'.

The Unitarian Social Service Department urgently calls for a 'feed-back' from Unitarians which will help it make a reappraisal of its work. Views and comments, individual and collective, will be welcomed and should be sent to:—The Secretary, Social Service Department, Essex Hall, 1-6 Essex Street, Strand, London, W.C.2, to arrive sometime during 1969.

## THE PROPHETIC ROLE OF THE CHURCH

The eternal role of the church is the prophetic one. Only in times when the church takes the prophetic, as against the institutional and assertive role, can it be really relevant to the age. Rarely is a church or a group of churches prophetic; we only have to look back to the Old Testament to see that it is the individual who is the prophet. Jeremiah is perhaps the best example. When all is well, and 'God's in his heaven, all's right with the world', no one wishes to hear the voice of doom. But it is exactly then that they need to hear it, for the seeds of the disintegration of any society are sown in the times of comfort and success. In his time Jeremiah set forth a new covenant between God and his people. In place of having to turn to the law and the priests for guidance, they will find the law of God in their own hearts and consciences, and each will feel himself in a close personal relationship with his heavenly Father. This was Jeremiah's finer conception of religion—not as a matter of ceremonial observances and certain fixed commandments, but of spiritual experience and response to the highest that we know. This was Jeremiah's plea to an alien age. In some ways it is our plea today, but it needs a new interpretation. This can only be given by an individual, and the church can really only play the prophetic part by following and supporting a prophet-leader.

Perhaps the oldest dichotomy to be found in any church structure is between the prophetic and pastoral. The first attempts to lift people to a higher view of God and the spiritual order, whilst the other endeavours to provide the loving community where in fellowship and help, both those inside and outside the community can find a higher meaning. Some religious communities, for instance the Quakers, play the pastoral role through their healing fellowship together. But in most churches, including the Unitarian, it is sometimes difficult to reconcile the prophetic and pastoral aspects. This is recognised in the American Unitarian-Universalist Association where there is a distinction between 'social action' and 'social service.' It might help us in this country if we attempted to make a similar distinction.



In the modern setting the pastoral aspect of the church's life supports the weak and the suffering in an environment which is already set and given. But the prophetic voice and action seeks to change both environment and society for many people, and calls on the strong for action. Jeremiah and the Old Testament Prophets called men to turn away from this world and return to God. For some Christians this still remains a valid function, but for others and for the modern secular world, the prophet calls men to make *this* world closer to the Kingdom of God. This is very well put in an extract from 'On being a Unitarian' by Rev. Phillip Hewett (Lindsey Press), page 108:—

'What Unitarian congregations do have in common is that all of them represent the attempt of a number of people to create a living community on the basis of their concern with life's central and inescapable issues. The questions to which they address themselves are not petty or peripheral, nor are they questions related to some conceivable future life but not to this one. . . . To a Unitarian the whole sweep of life and death, for the individual and for the human race, is the concern of the church.'

But still more difficulties lie in the way of the prophetic church. Much of our society has become anti-authoritarian and this creates difficulties for the church attempting to be prophetic. Unitarians are generally very aware of this, but in fact it applies to all forms of church organisation; even the Roman Catholics are starting to realise the importance of the individual conscience. However, there are ways of solving this problem. To quote Rev. Phillip Hewett (pages 109/110) again:—'So the question is still asked: "What does your church believe?" The only answer a Unitarian can give is that this question is like asking: "What does your family believe?", or "What does your university believe?'. Like a family or a university, a Unitarian congregation is a group with a vigorous and meaningful life of its own based not on shared beliefs but upon shared concerns of a different sort. . . . So the question, "What does your church believe?" has no meaning in a Unitarian context. The real question is, "What does

your church do?", or "What is your church for?". In the answers to questions like these lies the justification for a Unitarian congregation's existence.'

Then again, the man who seeks to be a prophet within an institution meets with difficulty in that all institutions tend to be conservative. His first task may therefore be that of convincing the timid of the need for change. But having recognised the difficulties that beset the prophet, through the very nature of prophecy, we must consider some of the fields in which the modern prophet must work. They are very much allied to the discussion on church and society, but are related more to the concept of 'social action' than of 'social service.'

Firstly, it lies in speaking up for social justice within a nation or state. This is a traditional form of Unitarian prophecy, and the old toast, 'To Civil and Religious Liberty' has sounded at Unitarian gatherings over the years. But we have tended to rest on our laurels and forget that new fields, where injustice is rife, open out before us during every age. Freedom of speech, equality of opportunity and full participation in the democratic process still remain areas for Unitarian concern.

Secondly, a prophetic function is still needed on behalf of international and inter-racial brotherhood. In these troubled times, in both Britain and the U.S.A., this is perhaps one of the most valid areas for prophetic statement. Not that we must say that the prophetic role shows itself only through the medium of the spoken word. The prophetic activity can be clearly seen in those working for legislation through existing schemes of government, and in organising and leading non-violent resistance.

We have many examples of people who have worked in this prophetic way — Shaftesbury, Wilberforce, Gandhi. In our own sphere, who would say that Dr. Dana Greeley did not speak with a prophetic voice when he took his stand against the war in Vietnam at the I.A.R.F. meetings in London in 1966?

These are the ways in which the church can speak and has spoken. Some of the names may seem very

grand but we in our small communities have an equal responsibility. J. R. Lowell's hymn is as true today as it ever was, and to live this creed must be the mark of any Unitarian church.

'Though the cause of evil prosper,  
Yet 'tis Truth alone is strong;  
Though her portion be the scaffold,  
And upon the throne be Wrong;  
Yet that scaffold sways the future,  
And, behind the dim unknown,  
Standeth God within the shadow,  
Keeping watch above his own.'

### Discussion prompters

(1) The pastoral role of the church has gained the upper hand as against the prophetic. It is for this reason, as much as any other, that the church is in a state of decline. Our churches especially are in danger of becoming mere therapeutic discussion circles.

(2) Our church structure militates against the prophetic. As soon as a leader emerges, he is forced silent by our system of government. We, by our very nature, distrust the prophet.

(3) Because the church is totally irrelevant, no amount of prophecy can save it. The church has lost touch with the modern world; when it talks of freedom of speech, equality of opportunity and full participation in the democratic process, it is talking about entirely different freedoms etc., from those with which 'student revolt' concern themselves.

(4) It is almost impossible for any religious organisation to speak out on the race issue. As soon as the man-in-the-street hears that it is the church that has spoken, his mind just closes up, as 'it is just the same old stuff', whether it is or not.

(5) There are many social issues on which only the church can speak and lead and act as a healing balm. Political enactments might provide temporary answers to problems like that of racial conflict, but only the spiritual message can provide the solution.

## UNITARIANISM AND SOCIAL ACTION

What are the implications for the social action of a religious faith which proclaims the divinity of man and the freedom of the individual? Does such a faith call for social and political action of a different nature from that of the faiths which proclaim the wickedness of human nature, and the necessity for the subjection of the individual to external authority?

The social implications of Unitarianism in the past, and to a large degree in the present, tend to be thought of in terms of a catalogue of the good works we should strive to do and the charities we should support, as a consequence of our faith in the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man. Most of the corporate Unitarian social action which took place in the 19th century was of this nature, a benevolent paternalism which made a very noble effort to relieve the misery and distress prevalent in industrial communities at that time. This was the role of the Domestic Missions and their devoted workers. But the usual policy of Unitarian churches was not to engage in corporate social action, but to encourage individuals to take up social service in outside organisations which specialised in such work. The record of individual Unitarians in this field is outstanding. Individual Unitarians were also active in the introduction of social legislation in parliament, but some were suspicious of these political solutions, though they must have realised that the paternal benevolence they were practising was not adequate to deal with such an enormous problem. In other words, Unitarians who believed in human goodness and individual freedom had not found any way of righting the wrongs and injustices of capitalist society which was compatible with those principles. Those who worked for reform found themselves resorting to legislation, direction by authority, and coercion. The others, remaining true to Unitarian principles, continued to rely on benevolence and voluntary work, but were saddened, like James Martineau, at the condition and the misery of the poor for whom they believed little could be done. They knew freedom was being abused to a very large degree, but they felt that to destroy freedom in order to



remedy its abuses was a cure worse than the disease. It used to be fashionable to scoff at their predicament, and to suggest that they were only protecting their own privileges, but now that we have seen how state socialism and communism have worked out in practice in various parts of the world, we have to admit that some of their fears were more than justified.

But if Unitarians could find no panacea for the ills of society compatible with their faith, they had in the structure of their own movement and in the government of their own churches an ideal which in many ways was an active expression of that faith. A decentralised movement with the local church democratically governed as the basic unit comes as near as it is possible to come to a working model of social expression of faith in individual freedom and in man. There has not, however, to my knowledge, ever been any suggestion in our movement that this model might be used in the organising of industry and in other human concerns. What interpretation we can put on this, I do not know, unless it be considered that only those who belong to the faith have the grace to operate such a system.

It has long been apparent that a strange dichotomy exists between the conduct of our domestic affairs and our prescription for the ills of society. Here we honour the freedom of the individual member, but there we seek to pass laws which we think are good with penalties for those who think otherwise and disobey them. Belief in individual freedom and in a local independency in the management of our denominational institutions follows logically from our faith, but it makes a most unhappy combination with political demands designed to coerce the recalcitrant individual, and to centralise power in the hands of the state. Of course it cannot be denied that there are some Unitarians who think that our domestic affairs should also be run on centralised lines; that our present system is inefficient and wasteful, and that our survival and salvation in the 20th century lies in strong and purposeful direction from the top.

But quite apart from the fact that the gains in efficiency from such a revolution are very questionable, the idea runs counter to the whole ethos of both the

Unitarians and their dissenting ancestors, and would leave our ideas and ideals standing alone as pure abstractions with no concrete expression in the life of the community. This would be a very high price to pay for efficiency—but could it deliver the goods? Judging from the various experiments in centralisation which have taken place in the last thirty or forty years, it could not. The efficiency of centralisation is largely a myth; what is not a myth is the dehumanisation and irresponsibility which follow among other evils in its wake. There are also certain factors evolving in the contemporary scene which tend to make centralisation unworkable. For instance, initially the advent of the automobile made travel easier, facilitating the getting of people from greater distances to work in a large concern instead of in smaller ones in their own locality. But as the volume of traffic has grown, the law of diminishing returns has begun to operate—with traffic choked roads, the bringing large numbers of people to work in big cities is becoming increasingly impractical. So the smaller concern situated near where people live is likely to re-emerge. Anyhow, while a case may be made out in theory for the greater efficiency of the large concern, in practice there are vital factors operating in the reverse direction; people will not give of their best to an establishment which is large, faceless and dehumanised, neither are they likely to feel any loyalty or responsibility towards it. These are practical factors which will, I believe, in time reverse the trend towards centralisation. Certainly this is not the time for a religious denomination such as ours to pick up the fag end of an ideology which had its heyday in the 1930's, and which has since been so much discredited in practice. On the contrary we should anticipate seeing some of our ideals being put into practice in other fields as the great centralised machine grinds to a standstill in the not too distant future. I contend at any rate that our theology and our faith gives us no mandate at all for modelling our movement on the lines of the centralised authoritarian society we find around us, but rather the reverse, that we should be trying to hasten the day when that society will become more decentralised, free and tolerant.



The social action which begins at home should not end there. The existence of a movement which is based upon tolerance in the midst of a society which is based upon intolerance presents some problems when that movement contemplates the social action it should take. Perhaps you think that it is untrue to say that society is based upon intolerance, but a moment's consideration should convince anybody that it is. This cannot be denied, though it may be argued that most of the intolerance is necessary. Society is based upon laws forbidding people to do certain things with punishments for those who do them. In other words its foundation is intolerance. Now members of a movement like Unitarianism which is based upon tolerance, when they contemplate social action outside their own circle have to ask themselves whether they ought to pursue their social aims by using the weapons of intolerance. If we do not within our own movement legislate for other people's lives and behaviour, have we a right to do outside it? This awkward question is rarely asked, yet I think we ought to ask it and try to frame some answer to it.

I can only speak for myself. The kind of answer I would give would be along these lines. In the first place, as humanity is at present, I have to admit that some coercion, some intolerance is necessary in society. But I see this as a palliative and not a cure for our social ills. It does not change people, at best it only makes them conform outwardly, at worst it turns them into incorrigible criminals. So I contend that while law and judgment and punishment may be necessary, they should not be the primary objects of Unitarian social action. We should perform the function of a therapeutic community concerned with the root causes of social ills rather than a judging, punishing community, and I do not think both functions can be performed successfully by the same institution; the laws of human psychology prevent that. The man who goes to a psychiatrist and confesses to a crime is seeking healing and help, not judgment and punishment. If the psychiatrist hands him over to the police, any chances he may have had of helping the man to live a different kind of life will be greatly diminished; he will have betrayed a con-

fidence placed in him. So it is I would say with the religious community based upon tolerance; it forfeits its power to heal and to have men's souls when its social action takes the shape of legislation designed to punish wrong-doers. We ought to be deeply concerned with the evils of our day and age, but it is the nature of our faith that it calls for action at the radical and fundamental level, and that in the end is the only level at which one can really do some good.

It is not a question of faith or works, but a complete fusion of the two. Faith is dead without works, but so are works without faith. If I may add yet one more definition to the many which have been given of Unitarianism, it would be **UNITY OF FAITH AND ACTION.**

#### **Discussion prompters**

(1) James Martineau was saddened at the condition and the misery of the poor. 'Freedom was being abused to a very large degree, but that he felt that to destroy freedom in order to remedy its abuses was a cure worse than the disease.' In a planned social and economic state, can we still hold this to be true? Is it better to starve and have freedom, or is freedom a meaningless ideal in this context?

(2) 'The efficiency of centralisation is a myth.' Historically, our movement affirms this to be true, and political parties now seem to think that regional decentralisation might be an important factor in making people feel involved in government? Is it the role of modern Unitarianism to support this view?

(3) 'Unitarianism is a movement based upon tolerance.' How far has this become a shibboleth? When was the last time we each defined what we meant by tolerance, particularly social tolerance?

(4) 'Law, judgment and punishment may be necessary, but they should not be the primary objects of Unitarian social action.' In an age of disrespect for the law, when it sometimes appears to be stretched to breaking point, should this still be the Unitarian position?



(5) 'It is the nature of our faith that it calls for action at the radical and fundamental level, and that in the end it is the only level at which one can really do some good.' If this is so, do we believe that compromise is evil? Must Unitarians, in the light of their faith, always support action at the radical level?

## SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY TO OUR NEIGHBOURS

### True or False?

*'On the whole, the local Unitarian church adopts neither the prophetic nor the pastoral role in the community but acts merely as a central meeting hall in an unrelated local setting. That is, it serves individual Unitarians in an area, but is otherwise not much concerned with the community in that area. The local church builds up its own community within itself.'* (Foy Society, 1965 Study Report on Sociology and Religion, p. 4.)

*' . . . Unitarian congregations and associations are too often living and working in isolation from the community which lies around them. . . . Individual churches have tended to be too self-centred, as if the perpetuation of their own life as groups were an end in itself.'* (Unitarians Discuss their Faith, p. 39.)

*'It has been our task to try to relate liberal religion to community life, and we have become convinced that much of the malaise that grips our Unitarian churches stems directly from the degree to which they have been cut off from the life around them.'* (The Unitarian Churches in Society Today, p. 2.)

### What is the mission of the local Unitarian Church in society?

The Social Service Department of the General Assembly has attempted to show that the level of social concern and activity on the part of Unitarians is higher than some critics would maintain. (See *'Unitarian Social Service in the Sixties.'*) Undoubtedly, there is a substantial amount of voluntary social welfare work being performed by individual members of the congregations, but all the available evidence points to a low level of corporate activity. Many of our congregations do not seem to appreciate that they have a mission to any but those within the immediate orbit of congregational life.

The variety of reasons given as to why a congregation cannot engage in corporate action outside the church

building might lead one to wonder how it is possible for the members to engage in genuine corporate worship within it. For the values expressed in worship together must be capable of expression in collective service, the one balancing the other. Inside the church building we worship the one God and as the church we are called upon to serve the one humanity.

The Faith and Action Report *'Unitarians Discuss their Faith'* states, pp. 11-12 para. 20 *'We believe that it is the business of a church to get involved in social issues; but we are afraid of mixing party politics with church life and because of our diversity we do not think we can often be involved in a corporate way . . . we would like to recover the image of a church engaged in corporate social action which we believe that we once had, but we are fearful that weak churches might be divided and further weakened by such enterprises.'* While it would, no doubt, be harmful to have a congregation identify itself with a particular political party, it should be recognised that to exclude the political from the ambit of church activity is to close the door on a vast area of meaningful adult concern.

When, in this strife-ridden world, we say 'Our Father' together, we are making a political statement. Within the local situation issues may arise which manifestly deny the Fatherhood of God and its corollaries. To such issues the local congregation may legitimately give its attention. Whatever the question, it is unlikely that there will be unanimity of agreement with the policy pursued. But if, after a free and full expression of opinion, general agreement is reached by a majority, then the minority should be able to accept the democratic principle. Particular situations call for immediate policies and the minority which, at the time, finds itself unable to go along with these policies need suffer neither loss of faith nor face. It is a grand thing about the Unitarian congregation that within the same religious fellowship of 'like-minded' people are men and women with different shades of religious opinion. But 'to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' at the expense of congregational non-participation in the affairs of practical religion might be con-

sidered too high a price to pay. 'We get along well together while we are discussing and doing things that don't much matter to us, but we fall out when we discuss and project action on matters of real concern' would be sad comment to make on our unity.

Frequently, the strength of the local church is gauged by the numbers on its membership role, the level of its domestic institutional life and the state of its church finances. These things are important but the witness of the church is made in the world at large. The local Unitarian congregation, whether of ten or a hundred members, has a mission as a corporate body within society. It is a mission of service in which it bears witness to the values of liberal religion and demonstrates the relevance of these values to present day living. How well it does this will be the measure of its strength or weakness.

#### **What can the local Unitarian Church effectively do?**

*'We would like to recover the image of a church engaged in corporate social action . . .'*

Local church histories provide ample evidence of the volume of educational and philanthropic activity which was undertaken by Unitarian congregations of the past. Charity Schools were founded, libraries formed, savings banks launched. 'A big congregation like Bristol had a whole series of different kinds of schools and institutions attached to it, even including a dispensary.' (R. V. Holt, *'Unitarian Contribution'* p. 253.) These activities were promoted for the needy, most of whom were outside the congregation. What were once philanthropic interests, created and sustained by the social conscience of past congregations, have now been taken over by local or national authorities and the larger voluntary agencies. Where the church led the Welfare State followed and went further, catering for the social needs not merely of the poor but of almost all classes. Yet as the welfare services increase their scope there is an increasing rather than a diminishing need for the help of voluntary workers. *'The more official services expand the more clearly it can be seen that they will*



*fail to reach their objectives unless the necessary voluntary initiative and co-operation of individuals and groups is forthcoming to sustain the work of the authorities and to create a right response from the community.' (From a speech by Mr. G. P. Haynes, Secretary of the National Council for Social Service, quoted in 'The Churches and Social Service'.)*

Local conditions vary but Unitarian congregations which recognise the need for the social expression of their religious faith will find no lack of opportunities for usefulness. The local congregation should form links with different aspects of community life. It may have representatives on such bodies as the Council of Social Service, the Marriage Guidance Council, the Council for the Care of the Elderly, the Community Relations Council, the Council of Churches. From such sources as these major needs may be ascertained and the possibility of action examined.

Some of our congregations have found avenues of service in promoting ventures for different age groups. An Over 60's Club, a Luncheon Club for the Elderly, an International Children's Play Group, fall within this category. Working together with other church groups, the local authority and the Council of Social Service, further projects which might be considered are a Day Centre for Shut-Ins, a mentally handicapped children's group, a Prisoners' Wives Club. 'Pioneer ventures' that could be undertaken with help from outside the congregation have been listed by the Social Service Department and these include housing association schemes, hostels for vagrants, work with groups for ex-prisoners, alcoholics, compulsive gamblers.

Another way in which the Unitarian congregation may show good neighbourliness and establish valuable links is in making its church premises available for neighbourhood secular organisations.

All of the above activities fall within the sphere of voluntary social welfare work. Social responsibility to our neighbours, however, involves the congregation in study, discussion and possible social action in a wider area. Every neighbourhood has its problems. These may

range from the need for better street lighting, for the provision of a zebra crossing or the opening of a children's playground, to the improving of community relations in a district which has a large immigrant population. Becoming a pressure group and mobilising support for remedial action is well within the province of the church.

### **Is there something distinctive because it is Unitarian?**

Probably the above question will best be answered by the Unitarian congregation as it tackles projects and attempts to carry through its mission in society. As it fulfils its responsibility to its neighbours it may discover a distinctive role emerging. Of course, Unitarians have no monopoly on social conscience and it would be wrong for a congregation to become preoccupied with the question of distinctiveness, perhaps to the neglect of the question: 'What can we do to supply this need?'

### **What is the future social role of the local church?**

The social role of the local church is really its future. Either it will switch its main attention from fund raising for the purpose of maintaining a building and its furnishings to dedicated self-sacrifice in the love of people, or its outdated machinery will creak on for a while longer and eventually stop. The church will have to revolutionise itself for a revolutionary age. Its members can begin the process by weeding out from the church programme all specially contrived non-events so that less time and energy is spent on church work and more time and energy may be devoted to the real work of the church.

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### **Concerns To Avoid the Seven Sins of Liberalism**

1. Let us concern ourselves, within the limits of time and strength, with some of the difficult and urgent social problems of our day. Thus, we avoid the *sin of indifference*.
2. Let us build our convictions regarding social problems, not on feelings, but on evidence; where a

reasonable amount of evidence seems lacking, let us suspend judgment until it is available. Thus, we avoid the *sin of emotionalism*.

3. Let us hold convictions seriously but flexibly, being ready to change them in the light of further evidence. Thus, we avoid the *sin of rigidity*.

4. Let us relate our convictions on social problems to more basic ethical and religious principles. Thus, we avoid the *sin of superficiality*.

5. Let us relate our convictions on social problems, and the more basic principles from which they stem, to our action. Thus, we avoid the *sin of lip service*.

6. Let us stand ready to try to understand and learn about the social convictions of others, and to help them understand and learn about our own, remembering always that the way of rational persuasion is a two-way street. Thus, we avoid the two-edged *sin of insufficient respect for others and for ourselves*.

7. Let us express and defend our own convictions publicly, when this will be constructive, whether our views are currently popular or not. Thus, we avoid the *sin of timidity*.

Elizabeth L. Beardsley

## Discussion Prompters

(1) 'The Church must serve individual Unitarians in the area, but is otherwise not much concerned with the community in that area.' Many of our churches answer to this description. Is this a healthy state of affairs? Is serving individual Unitarians in an area the only function possible for a Unitarian church today?

(2) 'It is impossible for politics to be brought into church life because of our diversity of thought.' Can this be held to be true today? Are not the most alive and relevant churches those which have become fully involved in community life?

(3) When must the church speak out on social issues? The Unitarian-Universalist Association of America is always ready to do this; and people increasingly feel, judging from a recent report, that they can more readily support an organisation which has some consensus of opinion. At the moment the Social Service Department speaks on behalf of the movement on social issues as they arise, but our views are rarely reported in the Press. Should we be more forceful in the social expression of liberal religious ideals?

(4) 'We get along well together while we are discussing and doing things that don't matter to us, but we fall out when we discuss and project action on matters of real concern.' Is this our indictment?

(5) It has been suggested in certain areas, by professional social workers, that the church is not wanted: it is just snooping, has an axe to grind and by its amateurism often does more harm than good. Is this true? Is the Churches' role out-of-date in the modern welfare state?

(6) The Unitarian Social Service Department is totally irrelevant in the modern situation. It is the local church that is the actual agency for social work. The Social Service Department is nothing but a talking shop with no real function to perform? Is this true?



(7) Because of the diversity of thought the Social Service Department cannot engage in corporate action; it can only encourage and advise. Is this old view of the Social Service Department still relevant?

(8) 'The Church is a pressure group. The Church consists of individuals acting out their faith in the realms of the wider society.' Can Unitarianism live with these two opposite views as to its structure?

## UNITARIAN SOCIAL MISSION NOW : AN APPRAISAL

It can certainly be said that very little re-thinking of the philosophy behind Unitarian social action took place until recent times. The first real effort came in the 1950's with the publication of 'Men and Women in Society; A study of the Social Implications of a Free Religious Faith,' by the Unitarian Social Service Department. Rev. Arthur Peacock, secretary of the Department from 1952 until his untimely death in 1968, did manage to make some re-interpretation and change some of the emphasis behind Unitarian social action. When he first took office, he was sent a short, informal memo from Rev. Principal R. V. Holt, who had been perhaps the main influence behind Unitarian social thinking for some years. Because of its importance, this memo needs to be quoted in full:—

### **"Is the Social Service Department a mere talking shop?"**

We have to recognise that Unitarians generally, including members of the Social Service Department, belong to different schools of political and economic thought, though I am not agreed on the particular way of meeting our present problems. I have no doubt that some would prefer the methods of Professor Jewkes and Hayek, while others would be more in sympathy with Lord Keynes and Miss Joan Robinson, to name the leading protagonists.

"But because they cannot advocate a particular proposal this does not mean, as is implied, that they are a mere talking shop. You could dismiss all thinking and discussion with that term. I, for one, would be quite satisfied if I knew that most Unitarians realised that they had to face up to certain social problems and were ready to discover the facts about these problems, and then to work for whatever solution was regarded by them as the best possible in the circumstances, providing always that they never lost sight of the ultimate mental, moral and spiritual values for which we stand. It is the mark of dictatorships to disparage thinking and discussion as mere talking. Men must act, but men must also study the problems before they can act wisely."

This last sentence was much quoted by Arthur Peacock to stress that, even in a changed society, the traditional role of the Department was still valid. People must be encouraged to think, and when they understand, they will act. This role must still remain the corner-stone behind the Department today.

However, the altered social scene of the 1950's did require much new thought, and this was supplied along six main fronts:—

(1) Because the state had taken over so much from the voluntary bodies under the Welfare State provisions, it must not be thought that voluntary action is no longer required. In fact there is greater need than ever for the non-professional social work agency.

(2) The Welfare State provided a whole new and massive range of services but it did, and does not, provide everything. Large gaps of human need are still to be found; here the church has a proper and valid role both as an innovator and as a watchdog for the needs of the individual.

(3) The professional social worker must be treated as a friend and helpmate, and not (as often thought of in the past) an enemy. Only by co-operation can it be ensured that there is no wasteful duplication of effort.

(4) We must be able, by the formation of contacts in the wider social field, to put churches who want advice in touch with organisations who would be able and willing to help them.

(5) To encourage congregations to engage in social action corporately, if they so wish, as part of their mission to the local community. This was new, as hitherto it had been felt that should a congregation as a whole wish and be able to do something for the community, together, so much the better, but because of the emphasis on individual action, it was not the place of the Department to encourage congregations in this way.

(6) If congregations asked the Social Service Department for detailed advice and step by step guidance on a proposed project every effort should be made by the Department to comply with the request.

These, rightly or wrongly, have been the points on which the Department has concentrated in recent years. But what about the congregations, and more important, our missions? What new interpretation of their function have they attempted in recent times? These, after all, are the people closely involved with the community.

Generally, we can say that contemporary individual and congregational effort in the realms of social service has been inhibited rather than encouraged by the formidable history of social concern and action among 19th century Unitarians. 'They did so much,—and what can we do now with such depleted resources?' is a comment often made. This view is mistaken. The past endeavours of our forebears were considerable within a 19th century context, but they should not be so inflated as to lead to present intimidation. Our Missions have suffered even more than our churches from their historical background. The pattern laid down at their inception has not been changed sufficiently to meet changing requirements and conditions. Support for their activities has consequently dwindled and the Missions have lost much of their importance. We must, however, note that the Rev. J. Keir Murren at Liverpool took up the challenge laid down by the Welfare State and tried to provide the right answers to new questions.

But there are hopeful signs of an awakening in our Missions. A few new horizons are being looked for, and hope can now be found in places which hitherto have been regarded as outdated. The 1968 General Assembly Meetings passed a resolution asking us to take a closer look at our Domestic Missions. This idea was taken up and in October 1968 a preparatory conference was held. Several valid and interesting matters of concern emerged, demonstrating that new thought is being attempted. The following are points the conference raised which I feel the Unitarian movement should look into, digest and discuss:—

“There should be a pattern of training at our Missions for all our theological students. Those who wished to specialise in this field should spend a year helping at a Mission; for the others a few weeks in attendance would suffice to give a good groundwork in the field. Ministerial



students should be encouraged to get into contact with a local authority who would be more than pleased to give them contact with the local social workers and their functions.

We need to rethink what our Missions are for. Generally they are not a mission to the poor. The modern Unitarian Mission must be a community centre for the involvement of people within local society. It is necessary for us to respond to the challenge that will shortly be laid down, probably authorised by Parliament, by the Seeborn Committee to become involved with the statutory authorities in providing an adequate social service to the community. Thus we need to redefine what we mean by a Domestic Mission—it exists to perform a ministry of need (not necessarily meaning poverty). A proper Mission set-up is probably one of the only ways of making the church relevant to the local situation.

It was not thought that there is a specific Unitarian angle to social work. Our impact will only be a reality if we are seen to be doing something. We act in the way we do *because* we are Unitarians, not just to *show* that we are Unitarians. Church premises must be fully used to demonstrate that they are there, and need to be used for a purpose.

There is a danger that an active Mission, by its momentum in the hands of a person, or a group of persons, can seemingly fall out of the hands of the Unitarians. In any project, members of the Mission congregation must be involved, or else our special voice will be lost.

Specific ways in which a Mission could act (or even a church because we found it difficult to draw a line between the two) were suggested:—

(i) To act as a welcoming centre. New flat development and mobility of population create loneliness and isolation. The Mission can function as a clearing house.

(ii) To act as a 'citizens' advice bureau to the social services'. Social provisions are often so complicated and variable that the church could be used as an information point, for those who do not know the ways of bureaucracy.

(iii) We need to recognise that our Missions are situated in areas where people are birds of passage who are not likely to climb very far up the social scale. We have to gear our work for these people.

(iv) In the areas around our Missions, there are few facilities for cultural recreation. We have a task here, which is being attempted in some of our Missions.

We believe that a future certainly does exist for our Missions, but their position must be rethought to act as a focal point in a local community, caring and adjusting to any need that may arise. Projects, when started, must have some suitable Unitarian involvement or our position will become lost. We have to provide a service to the community; where there are no rooms for meetings or cultural entertainments we must provide these services. Considerable publicity by GA and other sources concerning our Missions is about the only way we can be assured that they will continue. Money is not necessarily the biggest problem; finding the appropriate manpower is perhaps greater."

It is very difficult, at the moment, to see how Unitarian social service will develop in the future. In the 1930's and the 1940's, despite the courageous efforts of a few individuals, the Union of Social Service (now the Social Service Department) became moribund through sheer lack of interest on the part of our congregations. Our Missions were also much neglected. Their future could be bright, as could that of the Social Service Department. In the final analysis a great deal depends upon the attitude of Unitarians individually and collectively in their congregations. The Department is there 'to advise and encourage' but it can function satisfactorily only if our people are willing to respond to its efforts. Remarkable changes both in interest in and response to our work have taken place in the last ten years. We can only hope that in the next ten years these will be even more remarkable, and this is an issue which you, the reader, can help to decide.

### Discussion prompters

(1) 'Very little re-thinking of the philosophy behind Unitarian social action took place until recent times.'

We worry too much about the philosophy, rather we should be out doing good works without thinking too closely why we are doing them.

(2) Is it silly that our Missions, churches, etc., should look for gaps in the welfare services? Should they attempt to provide a complete service to the locality, in the knowledge that their approach to problems will be very different from that of any other agency? Has the Church such a special role that to compare it with secular welfare bodies is ridiculous?

(3) Is our long history of involvement in society acting like a millstone round our necks, and preventing our properly orientating ourselves to modern conditions? Are our numbers and the money available too small for us to be able to serve the community with any effectiveness?

(4) 'In any project, members of the Domestic Mission congregation must be involved, or else our special voice will be lost.' Is this an irrelevant view in the light of the developments in the last twenty years, in social provisions and case work? Are we just like ostriches with our heads in the sand?

(5) Encouraging congregations to act corporately is the wrong approach for Unitarians. Their views are so diversified that to encourage Unitarians to act out their faith in the wider community is the only role the Social Service Department can fulfil.

(6) Thinking that we are doing social work by providing rooms for meetings and for cultural events, is ludicrous and we deserve to be laughed at for taking this view.

(7) Our Missions are already completely unimportant and should be scrapped. Then we can start again with something fresh which might have a chance of being relevant to modern needs.

(8) We spend too little on our social responsibility activity. We should either scrap it altogether and give a percentage of our income (both collectively and individually) to charity, or give our social work centres a proper financial basis so that they might have a chance of success.