



**North Shore Unitarian Church**  
*... discover meaning together*

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*A sermon by The Rev. Stephen Atkinson, Minister*

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## **CHURCH WITH PURPOSE**

For many Canadians, the state of Tennessee makes us think first about Memphis and Nashville. Graceland and the Grand Ole' Opry. Even though I never danced to "Ain't Nothin' But a Hound Dog" or made out to "Can't Help Falling in Love With You", I know that Elvis Presley was a musical genius and a force of nature that blew open some aspects of social bondage, and the western world has never looked back since. And though the charms of Minnie Pearl and Waylon Jennings were lost on me, I sing my heart out in highway duets with Trisha Yearwood and fall every time for the particular agony of those country hurtin' songs that issue from Nashville like news bites from Washington. And I'm not even mentioning the Blues because it's not my kind of music, but I know it has deep roots in Tennessee.

If we think at all past the musical associations and let our minds wander out of the cities, we probably hit the Appalachians immediately and think of hillbillies and poverty. And that probably takes us pretty fast to remembering that Tennessee is firmly in the American South; it was a confederate state, a dangerous place for racial minorities. Someplace where Billie Holliday might have had to sleep in the bus for want of a hotel room, and where cottonwood trees have a grisly connotation.

The city of Knoxville is on the edge of East Tennessee, the Tennessee'est part of Tennessee; in trying to think of a Canadian version, I came up with a cross between Cape Breton and Red Deer. This isn't to denigrate either of those places or East Tennessee; I'm pretty familiar with Cape Breton, and it's Irish and Scottish roots are very similar to those of the Appalachian people. Its traditional hard-edged coal-mining economy is rather similar to Tennessee's in the past, and it's also a hotbed of downhome music. I added Red Deer because of both the high tech and small-c conservative implications that come with Alberta. I'll stay away from the Capital-C implications, today at least.

Knoxville isn't to be confused with Fort Knox which is up in Kentucky, but you've probably heard of Oak Ridge which is right next door; it's kind of a sister city to Los Alamos, New Mexico, both being sites of nuclear research facilities of the Manhattan Project during WW II developed the first atom bombs. Oak Ridge has a Unitarian church in which most of the members are physicists and other scientists; one of its members is an old friend of mine from medical school days who's now a therapist there. The Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church (TVUUC) of 500 members is in Knoxville itself, and there's a third local church in nearby Farragut, the Westside Unitarian Universalist Church. One of my seminary friends grew up UU in East

Tennessee; her mother was in the church when the shootings occurred. And a friend of our church, classical flautist, Tanya Kliefoth, whom you heard play and sing here last year is from Knoxville. I'm telling you this so you get a sense of the mix of the place.

Like all Unitarian Universalist churches, TVUUC supported and promoted liberal ideas about social tolerance and religious freedom. It has waved a banner, literally, on its building for years that says that gays and lesbians are welcome there. The man who carried a shotgun into that church and enough shells to kill everyone there left a note in his truck; his intention was to be shot to death by the police after taking out as many "liberals" as he could, especially in a place that tolerated gays and lesbians. He knew of the church directly; he didn't just pick it because of its banner, but he had hated the place and its principles for many years.

A church like TVUUC sticks out like a sore thumb in a conservative community. But it is a visible beacon and a courageous voice in the lives of those that cherish and support it, as well as those who need to hear their message – *our* message - in that kind of social environment. That flagship Unitarian Universalist congregation in Knoxville is a church with purpose. Everyone in the area who knows it at all, knows its purpose.

Let me give you another example of church with purpose from another direction. I regularly read an online digest called *The Revealer*, edited by Jeff Sharlet, the author of the recently published book, *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power*. *The Revealer* provides brief commentaries on and links to media articles about religion; you can imagine how many of them in the last two months have been triggered by issues arising from the United States Presidential campaigns. There is far more material than I can even allude to, but what I want to draw to your attention to is the growing evidence of a certain kind of Christian ideology and its plans literally to take over the world – and I say again a *certain* kind, a substrata of Christian thinking, and indeed, in the eyes of traditional Christian thought, a *heresy*. Our history is rooted in heresy, as well, but not all heresies bear fruit or enhance the world as we know that ours has done.

In Sharlet's book, *The Family*, he tells of an extensive, under-the-radar network of fundamentalist Christians who are systematically courting the political and business elite in North America and Europe, if not further afield. I would be totally unsurprised if some Canadian politicians were not already affiliated with this network, although I've not heard any evidence of it; this group purposely tries to conceal itself, in any case. The purpose of *The Family* is to develop ties with those who have worldly power and influence so they can attract them to their kind of religion, putting power in the hands of Christians who believe they know the will of God and are destined to bring it about. To give you a sense of how subtly they can draw someone in, according to Sharlet, Hillary Clinton is associated with this network, though I don't know if she remains as much so since the publication of this book.

The members of the Family believe they will bring about their version of the Kingdom of God in physical reality. Based on what some interpret to be Biblical

prophecies, they support the state of Israel *because* they see it as the most likely way to bring on Armageddon; that's just one example of what they do. The energy they tap into is driven in the sense that any fanatic is driven – by the arrogance of certainty and the lust for control. They also are a church with purpose – an underground church with a secret purpose.

So in these two examples we have the yin and yang of religious purpose; its light side and its dark side – and I have no problem displaying my bias here. Don't mistake me, though, as saying *all* of religion is darkly motivated; not at all. But when it is, it is vital that we know it and that we counter it. Which brings us to *our* church with *our* purpose.

North Shore Unitarian Church turned 41 earlier this year, but in some ways we are still coming to maturity as a community. I've heard many stories of the early salad days; the excitement of becoming independent from the Vancouver Church, and of running our own programs; the creativity and playfulness both religiously and socially. That was a time of creating narrative and building bonds.

Then there was a period of turmoil – I won't call it adolescent, but it did have something to do with coming to terms with power and authority; how to wield it and how to deal with it in times of conflict. We are now in the early years of being consciously determined to grow and mature in our functioning; you worked hard on that before I arrived and we continue to work on it.

Some of our church procedures are a bit loose and rough around the edges; it's taking time for us to sort them out and develop new habits. For example, this year we're trying out a number of changes in our Sunday service; each is rather small, but they've come all at once and it feels a bit strange. We're taking care of community business in a couple of new ways; the announcements come first, and they will be tighter and quicker. The take-home insert each week in the Order of Service will contain other news and notices you need; starting next week they'll be on yellow paper, easier to identify but still readable for all. Small changes in process like this are signs of a church's evolution. Some will enhance the life of the church and stick; some will fall away and be replaced, but the whole process moves toward a strong and well-functioning community.

Part of that process is also for us to become increasingly clear about who we are. To a degree that's a literal question: who are our members and friends? How does one become and remain a member? Does it help to have categories of membership? What benefits come with it and what expectations – yes, I've used the word; there's no substitute for it – what *expectations* do we have of members? Similarly, how will the community take care of each other and accommodate reasonably to circumstances? This literal definition of who we are is also a sign of developing maturity.

In a more indirect sense, what is it about some people that makes us want to be members and friends of this church? We must hold many things in common, yet it is

difficult at times for us to articulate them. We know that we have differences and that usually we're very accepting of them. Why are we that way? There are values we have that bring us here, and values we learn here that keep us returning. We have only a partial sense of what they are. As we continue to define our mutual values, both those we hold now and those we desire and want to offer to our community, so we will become clearer about our community identity and where that places us in the world.

Right now, we are in the early stages of looking at these questions of identity. One of the many items on the Board's agenda for this year is to look further at our expectations of membership with the task force of members and staff that began this work last spring. Also, just on the horizon, there is a study group of members who have been examining issues related to size of membership and the challenges of growth; most of this involves evolving procedures and identity. For the church to do all this at once is impossible, so we are engaging these questions at different stages and speeds.

What we are first focusing on this year is purpose. Last year, the Board decided that the final step in the development of our mission and vision is that we make it very clear first to ourselves and then to the community what our purpose is. Our *raison-d'être*. The ultimate goal of all that we do, at least as we conceive of... as we *dream* of it now. If we had a neon sign, it would be better not to flash out our name, but rather our *purpose* – bright and clear for all to see, and for those looking for it to find and choose.

For all of us last year when we debated about our property, it was a sense of purpose that was motivating our ideas. We don't all have the same purpose in mind for this church, which is to be expected at this point. Even if we did, we might not all imagine bringing it about in the same way. But the still small voice in our minds as we imagine ourselves into a new space is our drive towards purpose.

Another of the small changes you'll find in your Order of Service is the altered wording when we extinguish our chalice. I like to think that our candle may be put out, but that our light continues to shine out in the community. We purposely carry its light and warmth with us not just to hold but to share with others, and we *do* this; we *make* it happen. By simply turning the ideas around in this way, we raise our sense of purpose.

Every living thing is driven by purpose. In the vastness of the biosphere, that purpose is overwhelmingly driven by the fate of genetics and speciation; each organism lives to survive and reproduce. In the background is the über-process of evolution – some see it as chaotic and without intention, while for others it is the progression of the universe towards self-consciousness. Either way, in human beings the universe has given birth to the *sense* of purpose, not just blind, driven purpose, but conscious and chosen purpose. Further than that, *courageous* purpose.

There is another Unitarian church I know of in the American south because a dear friend of mine served there recently. In the 1960's someone shot a bullet through its windows during the civil rights era when that church also was known for its support of

justice and equality. Unfortunately, that church turned inwards, built itself a windowless fortress, has never since sought a public identity and is gradually dying.

This is not so in Knoxville today. Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church has a purpose, and everyone who knows of it, knows what it is. Paradoxically, it's sense of purpose brought renewed life to many people, but also death to a few. The churches in that area have embraced the pain and the fear that their profile brought to them; they refuse to be intimidated. Their purpose remains the most important part of their community. As a result, more people know of them; more churches and religious societies in Knoxville have worked with them co-operatively; indeed the principles of Unitarian Universalism are more widely known in the world than could possibly have happened if they had been less clear about their purpose.

This fall, the Board is setting up for our congregation a means towards defining our purpose; you'll be told more about it in the coming weeks. You will be its driving force and source of inspiration. In a wide selection of venues, you will have the opportunity to talk about this church as it has formed your life and as you envision its work for others. We ask you to bring your voice into the conversation.

Purpose breathes life into a community; it gives direction and strength and the courage to grow in maturity and influence. With it, we expand; without it, we risk obscurity, and we are not going to settle for that. We are moving, whether physically, spiritually or both, into our time, when our purpose is clear, and everyone who knows of us, will know what it is.

May we make it so.