

# **Beyond Our Borders**

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Good morning everyone. It is a pleasure to speak to you this morning. This church has now become part of our global network of partners through a relationship developed with your congregation through Bruce and then Rev Shawn and Ellen whom I have known for a few years now and it is only fitting that I speak to you this morning about the concept of “Belonging” and how in many ways, we belong to you, you belong to us, we belong together as brothers and sisters part of the larger human family.

But first my personal story about how I came to belong to Unitarianism.

I was born and raised in the central part of Burundi, in the small country of central Africa. I am from a family of 10 and I happen to be number 8 in the family. Growing up, I regularly attended Roman Catholic mass and Spanish missionaries who were at my local mission (or parish in the modern sense) were so impressive that I came at a very young age to like and to hope to be a priest. They played music for children in the villages and took women who were ready to have babies to hospital. They led a life of service to the community.

In 1986, the then government decided to send back all the European missionaries because the country leadership felt there were some interferences in the politics of the country.

My missionaries went home and at the end of my primary school, I couldn't attend the minor seminary, it was suspended. I attended the regular secondary school, and then joined the Dominicans to make my dream of becoming priest become a reality.

Some surprises awaited me; the learning environment was very good, but the theological discussions (that Dominicans are particularly fond of) started to turn boring. We had things we should not question, there were things that simply belonged to “our faith” and I somehow started to ask some uncomfortable questions to my lecturers about the trinity, about Mary, about Jesus...

The philosophical training made things even harder and I started to think that maybe I was in the wrong place. I was doing very well in class, my social life was just fine and my community life met the standards. The problem? I had lost my faith!

It is during this confusion that an announcement on the notice board literally saved me!! I was leaving the dining area after lunch when my attention was caught by an announcement. Father Gislain Labonté had left the order of the Dominicans to join a Unitarian Universalist Church.

I knew Gislain by his writings as an open and free Biblical scholar with an inquisitive mind. So, the next thing I did was to go on Internet and search for UUsm. I knew that if it fitted, Gislain, it probably was good. What a surprise? That day, I spent many hours on my computer, I was not converted, I discovered that I was a Unitarian.

It was towards the end of my theological training that I decided to leave the Dominicans and be on my own.

This was a difficult transition as you can imagine. My parents expected to have a priest, my friends viewed myself as a priest, I had to adjust to normal style life after 7 years in convent.

But I had all it took to leave the convent; 1. I had lost my faith in the Roman Catholicism 2. I was not comfortable where I was and 3. I had found a new spiritual home. And... I left.

The first people I talked to after my discovery were the then president of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists; Rev. Jill McAllister serving a church in Kalamazoo Michigan, the second one was Rev. Gordon Oliver of Cape Town South Africa and the Third was Rev. Ray Walder , the then Minister of Black pool Unitarian Church in the UK. They all encouraged me in my new wanderings, sent materials to read and kept in touch via email. The newly found family was proving to be supportive.

But the magic moment, believe me, came from England: Rev. Ray Walder wrote to me, encouraged me and at some point told me “ you know what? Build your own church”. That was literally the beginning of the Unitarian Church in Burundi.

I talked to some of my friends about my new experience and immediately 5 people were interested and we started meeting in my house. Discussing different religious themes without guilt and in a very supportive way. In 2004, we started to meet as a Church on a regular basis. The Black pool Unitarian Church collected 400 pounds and we rented our meeting place for 1 year.

In 2010, I gave a lecture as part of the ICUU Minister’s conference and a theological symposium that followed with both dealing with the theme of our different identities and how our commonalities could help us improve both our communication and our collaborative ministry.

Most of you have been Unitarians long enough, definitely much longer than me, and I bet that at certain point, you met a Unitarian and wondered what really united you; what you had in common! He or she

was probably a radical humanist, a God centered –atheist or a confused Christian whom really Christians would never let in!

Rev. Brian Keily, the current ICUU president said that UUsm is not really a global faith but rather a collection of indigenous expressions of liberal religious spirit. The land we live on, the environment that surrounds us, the culture we live in and the general context heavily influence the way we perceive and express ourselves religiously.

But what do we share that can be contagious, that UUs around the world can be comfortable with? What is the glue that makes us stick together?

I think the Unitarian principles can be the first place to turn to. The freedom of conscience which we all cherish, the high importance given to individual judgment in matters of faith, the worth and dignity of every person, the concern for justice and compassion in human relations, the web of life and the commitment to democratic principles are some of the elements of what could be called the UU identity. What can we do to belong to the same clan of UUsm? What are the values that are common to all that could be built upon? Having been lucky enough to participate in a number of international events and having talked with many UUs from different parts of the world, I have come to believe that we are capable of “Understanding Differences; and Acting on Commonalities.”

The Concept of “belonging” speaks to me as an African but also as a Unitarian. As an African, the community bonds are many like belonging to a clan, to an ethnic group, to a region... but this type of “belonging” is not chosen but rather given. But I have had a chance to choose some other types of “belonging” and being a Unitarian is one of them.

In a strong Roman Catholic country (80% according to some statistics) to be a Unitarian is a bit of a challenge. A part from being a minority, which is true in many other countries as well, there is the fact that people do not see us entirely as Christians or non- Christians and think of us as some sort of crazy grouping.

The main challenges are the fact that we are in a very evangelical country where the Unitarian church is not yet completely accepted. There is also the abject poverty that calls everyone to do something to improve the situation.

Our church has positioned itself to be an agent of change by standing on two legs; the work to grow our congregation by planting the seeds of the liberal faith and respond to the religious and spiritual needs of the members but also to perform hopeful signs of change in the community by our social justice work.

Our hope is that by working in partnership with UUs around the world, we can indeed achieve and BE the change that we want to see.

Being part of a global family, being able to have UU colleagues and friends in Toronto and all over the world with whom we can share our troubles like the recent central market fire, security concerns, poverty concerns is simply remarkable.

The first Unitarian congregation of Toronto has been very supportive during the recent crisis caused by the central market fire especially messages of comfort and encouragement that we received through your minister and other members.

This is yet one more sign that we belong together; as you know from recent media news, the central market fire destroyed livelihoods of thousands of people and disrupted our basic economy and touched beneficiaries of our micro lending programme mostly women who became widows as a result of the long civil war or HIV/AIDS.

As the tragedy unfolded and we watched the market fire, we received numerous messages from around the world comforting us, checking on us and asking whether we are okay and asking whether there is anything that people can do to support brothers and sisters in Burundi. We are grateful that today's offering will go to support victims of this tragedy and the HIV/AIDS programme and an opportunity to show, once again, that we are one family.

May our different types of belonging be opportunities of a renewed awareness that as individuals, communities and societies, we belong to realities bigger than ourselves, larger than our local communities and bigger than our societies? That is my prayer. May be it so.

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### Final benediction:

Let's go now in peace

May our longings and our different types of belongingness

Help us be better people and better agents of change and peace

May we stand on two legs

Tending to our spiritual, human and religious needs and at the same time

Engaging in social justice action to change lives of our brothers and sisters for the better.

May we all keep the flame of our values and principles alive.

“ Now let's GO”