

Our Church's Liberal Theology

By Jerry Stinson

Because of our liberal theology, the First Congregational Church appeals to those with religious questions and spiritual longings who cannot accept the belief systems central to much of organized religion. We draw those who can no longer recite traditional creeds because the words stick in their throats. We attract those hurt by other churches where there seems to be more judgment than acceptance. But what is liberal theology? Here are some central affirmations at the heart of the life of First Church.

OUR GENERAL APPROACH TO RELIGION

1. We affirm free thought.

All church members can believe what their consciences, minds, experiences and emotions lead them to affirm. The ministers at First Church simply share from the pulpit, their own faith understandings hoping that helps others on their faith journeys. The sign on my office door says, "Think for yourself, your ministers may be wrong."

2. We affirm a fundamental unity of experience.

There is no intrinsic conflict between faith and knowledge, religion and the world, sacred and secular. Rather than seeing culture, especially science and the arts, as a threat to religious faith, liberal Christians understand their faith with reference to their experience within contemporary culture.

3. We define ourselves as a community of seekers.

We want to be a house of truth-seeking for those with searching minds and hearts. We find more value in questions than in absolute answers. We are not afraid of doubt.

4. We respect the human mind and its thought processes.

This is a church where you don't have to check your mind at the door. You are encouraged to think for yourself.

5. We do not limit the quest for religious truth to the intellect.

We are a community of yearning spirits crying out for experience. Our focus on reason is balanced by a conviction that our hearts and souls must be fed along with our minds. So mystics abide in a community of seekers and we offer people many ways to experience an eternal presence.

6. We celebrate and respect the religions of every age and culture.

There is wisdom in all the world's living faiths. We recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm and we acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us.

7. Liberal Christianity is necessarily innovative.

If we are open to new ideas, then we must be willing to change, grow and think outside the boxes in which we sometimes find ourselves. We need the courage to let go of ideas, notions and practices that we no longer affirm.

SPECIFIC THEOLOGICAL AFFIRMATIONS

1. We affirm the worth and dignity of every human being.

All people have equal claim to life, liberty and justice. So our faith community welcomes men, women and transgender people of all races, backgrounds, classes, abilities, and sexual orientations. Acknowledging the reality of sin and failure, we are nevertheless profoundly humanistic affirming the goodness and potential of humankind

2. Most of us see the Bible as a collection of helpful ancient human reflections about God and the meaning of life.

The biblical narratives arose from a particular group of Middle Eastern people who were seeking meaning in their journey through life. For most of us at First Church, the Bible is not as much God's word as it is a collection of human words with the potential to liberate and propel us on a wondrous excursion of exploration.

3. The historical Jesus opens for us a pathway to God.

Jesus, a Palestinian peasant teacher, began a reform movement within Judaism. He did not try to create a new religion. His life and teachings offered hope and transformation to those at the bottom of society. For most of us, Jesus is not a divine figure sent from God to pay for the sins of a fallen humanity, but instead the human Jesus is the highest model of religious life. Jesus opens for liberal Christians a pathway to God which becomes for us a mirror into our own human potential and a window into God's love.

4. We understand God in various ways, but affirm in common that God's presence, filled with unconditional love, is everywhere.

For me, God is beyond theism, a life force rather than a personal being. Forrest Church speaks for many liberal Christians: "God is our name for that which is greater than all, yet present in each. God is the mystery that looms within and arches beyond the limits of my being. Life force, Ground of All Being, Being itself are names for the unnamable."

5. Most liberal Christians see prayer as a human venture.

We do not pray to convince God to intervene in human experience. Genuine prayer isn't a shopping list of wants. It is a desire to simply "be" in the presence of the Ground of All Being. Through prayer, we feel God's presence, sense God's love, and try to realign our sense of self with what we think God calls us to be. Prayer is being in the presence of God sharing who we are and what matters most to us.

6. Most liberal Christians are uncertain about life after death, but we hold on to a hope anchored in God's unconditional love.

We believe death brings absolute cessation of mind and body, but acknowledging mystery and the limits of human knowledge, we also affirm that that does not rule out possibilities of something beyond death, ranging from the immortality of the soul to reincarnation. Most liberal Christians are not afraid to say we don't know if there is anything beyond the grave and that it is sufficient for us to remember we are always surrounded by God's love. And salvation for most liberal Christians has nothing to do with life after death. Salvation is a state of wholeness, health, and shalom occurring here and now

when we are at peace with ourselves, with others and with nature.

7. Liberal Christians want to create communities of faith where people care deeply for one another and seek to help heal a wounded world.

In liberal Christianity, religion is more about relationships than commandments, and communities of faith affirm relationships where we nurture and sustain one another in difficult moments, where we encourage one another on our spiritual journeys and where we work together to create a better world.

8. We know that the way we behave toward one another is ultimately more important than what we believe.

In fact, the way we behave toward others is the fullest expression of what we believe. Karen Armstrong, a powerful voice for liberal religion, says, "Religion is about behaving in a way that changes us, that gives us intimations of holiness and sacredness...Religion is not about accepting impossible propositions, but about doing things that change us. The religious quest is not about discovering 'the truth,' but about living as intensely as possible here and now. The idea is not to latch on to some superhuman personality or 'get to heaven' but to discover how to be fully human." How we behave is more important than what we believe!

Most members of First Church probably accept the majority of the affirmations found above. But because of our respect for free thought, many members may reject a few of the affirmations. But the thirteen affirmations at least offer a picture of the kind of theology at the heart of this liberal congregation of the United Church of Christ.

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