The Salish Sea Fellowship
An Independent Community of Unitarians & Universalists

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What is a Liberal Religious Community?

Religiously liberal congregations are communities based on covenant rather than creed, on the practice of "right relations" over "right belief." They are communities whose identity is related more to principles, processes, and values than to specific religious doctrines. The following "Core Ideas of Religious Liberalism" or "A Free Faith" is one statement of the principles, processes, and values of religious liberalism.

1) **Freedom of the individual and personal responsibility**

- Probably the most important principle and value in a free faith or free religion is the freedom of the individual in asking and answering life's most important questions, questions such as: Who am I? How am I related? What is good? What is the nature and aim of Being?
- Religiously liberal congregations are formed to provide a structure, container, or environment in which individuals are granted the largest possible freedom to reflect, think, ponder, consider, question, doubt, probe, explore, search, research, and re-search. Free churches are religious communities that build, guard, and defend the structures that allow for freedom of thought and individual conscience.
- Free churches operate on the understanding that truth is best discovered when a person is free to ask and search. Where beliefs are coerced, directly or subtly, the power of religion is lessened. Religion is more real where it is self-chosen and based in personal experience.
- In free congregations, authority in regard to belief is ultimately that of individual conscience, not that of a church official, historic creed, or sacred text.
- Freedom, however, is not an independent or absolute value; freedom in both individual and community life is always in relationship to order, structure, and previous destiny.
- Though there is no "test of belief" in free churches, the freedom in free churches is not intended to foster the attitude of: "You can believe anything you want here," or "Anything goes," or "All ideas are of equal merit." The purpose of freedom in religion is to deepen, not dilute, one's faith; it is an invitation to push forward, not draw back. Liberty is intended for discovery and growth, not laxity, laziness, license, or lawlessness.

- Freedom is not the end, but the beginning; not the goal, but the means. Freedom is the pre-requisite, the pre-condition, for the discovery of truth. It has to do with freedom to more than freedom from.
- Free religion encourages the open mind and the loving heart. At the same time, the open mind is not an empty mind and the loving heart is not an indiscriminate heart.
- Freedom requires courage and personal discipline because one is responsible for one's ideas, beliefs, and actions.
- Free congregations promote a process or spiritual discipline in which one can discover the richest possible content for one's self and the community.

2) Diversity of belief and the principle of pluralism

- A free congregation is a religious community designed to encourage the full flowering of the individual person, a form of relatedness that yields diversity of belief.
- Free religion assumes that just as each person has his or her own set of fingerprints so each person will have his or her own way of thinking, feeling, and expressing him or herself.
- A free faith promotes the idea that truth can be seen from many sides, like a jewel with many facets and angles.
- Religious liberalism operates on the idea that there is not just one right religion, or one way of seeing things, or one way of expressing things.
- A free faith is based on the idea that truth is available for all to seek and find; and that there is no special time, place, people, culture, or religion that has the corner on truth.
- A free faith, based as it is on the principle of respect for the individual, teaches the art of active listening so that the understanding of both speaker and listener may be enlarged.
- In a free community where ideas should be questioned and tested, the effort must be made to both speak clearly and listen carefully.
- Religious liberalism goes beyond "mere toleration" to promote the ideal of pluralism – unity out of plurality and plurality within unity. Diversity is the "fact," pluralism is the "ideal."
- A free church does not first of all ask "What is right belief?" but "How do we treat each other?" Its motto is: "Right relations before right belief" and "Deed before creed."

- In religiously liberal congregations, courtesy has a religious dimension; it is needed to protect individuals so that they may express themselves openly and without fear of ridicule or reprisal.

3) The dignity, worth, and value of each individual and the ideal of justice

- A free faith promotes the idea that it is in the individual that the universal power of life is expressed.
- A free faith holds that all persons have an equal claim to life, liberty, and justice.
- Free churches promote democratic process in their congregations so that their communities can govern themselves.
- The aim of a free faith may be said to be the liberation and cultivation of the human spirit – first to liberate, that is, to provide freedom, and, secondly, to cultivate, that is, to provide opportunity for growth and development.
- Historically, religious liberalism has been characterized by a concern for this life on this earth, not life after death – the idea of: "One life at a time."
- Religious liberalism promotes the ethical application of religion in this life, seven-day-a-week religion. Religion and life are one: religion is life, and life is religion.

4) Truth unfolds over time

- Religiously liberal congregations generally operate with the idea that truth is not fixed in the past but open and growing into the future, and that life builds, in an evolutionary way, on the past.
- In religiously liberal congregations, revelation is "not sealed;" it is continuous and ongoing, not final and fixed.
- A free faith promotes a continuing search for truth and new beliefs. Free congregations are non-creedal, not because they are without beliefs, but because they will not be restrained or limited in their beliefs. They operate with the belief that beliefs can be developed, deepened, re-examined, and adjusted.
- In religious liberalism, faith and doubt, belief and knowledge, religion and reason, ritual and rationality, the sacred and the secular, mysticism and science are not in opposition to each other.
- The free church tradition points individuals toward the future with hope based on the idea of the continuous unfolding and developing of life.

This statement was written by Reverend Bruce A. Bode, Minister Emeritus of Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Port Townsend, WA, during his tenure, 2004□2018, and continues to inspire us.