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| **Monton Unitarian Church**  **Reflection – Curious about Church?**  **12th July 2020** |
| **Opening words**  To start our worship, some wonderful words by David S Blanchard.  Come down off the ladder. Wash out that paintbrush. Shake the sand out of your shoes. Get up off your muddy knees, and give the garden a morning off. Fold up the newspaper. Turn off the coffeepot. Close up your calendar, already filled with dates, and times, and people, and places that claim you.  This church is ready for you to fill its rooms, to create its spirit, to generate its warmth, to kindle its light. This church is ready for you to make community, to create beauty, to bend it toward justice, to serve its ideals. This church is ready for you to be here, honouring our past, invigorating our present, and dreaming our future. This is your church. Here we are home. Here we are whole. Let us begin. |
| **Prayer**  Victoria Weinstein wrote the most beautiful prayer to celebrate the church – it recognises so many aspects of the church, and how much we have to offer. So let us join together in a time of prayer.  Spirit of Life and Love  May we recognise that this church is a body. May this body breathe and be together in the spirit of hope. May it feel held by comfort. Those who seek consolation, may they find it in the solace of this moment.  May we recognise that this church is a body. It is as strong as all the people who have ever gathered within its walls. It is the power of all they dreamed and all that they have done.  May we recognise that this church is a body. It is as vulnerable as the most newborn and untried of its members. It is ancient, and it is ever new.  May we recognise that this church is a story. It is the story of lives that are interwoven, brought together in this place and this time for the simple purpose of caring for one another, and helping one another along the arduous path from birth to death.  May we recognise that this church is a vision. It is a vision of unity amid diversity. It is a vision of reverence for all of creation. It is a vision that beckons us beyond the concerns of our own skins.  May we abide as one body in the spirit of faith, hope and love that is the story and the vision of this church. |
| **Story - Tom the Church Organist**  A little later today, we will be having our Annual General Meeting – when we think about who we are, what we are, what we’ve achieved in the past year, and what we want to be and do in the future. And yes, this story has been used before, but it’s perfect! So with a cheeky sideways glance at our church and its people, here’s a story about an organist, and a congregation.  Tom was Church organist. No one ever asked him to speak at the Church services. Yet he had long worked out what he would say if ever he was given the chance. He had long thought, how like an organ is a congregation. So he would tell them about the organ, and about it being a collection of parts and pieces – keyboards and notes, trackers and valves, stops and pedals, couplers and weights, the bellows and wind chest and the pipes. He would tell them how some of the pipes are permanently at the front, and at times painted up and a bit showy. How some of the pipes blare badly if not properly controlled, some sing sweetly, some only whisper, and some are all of a tremble if they have to be heard. And as he knew and loved the congregation well enough he would confess to them that at times he labelled individual members with the organ part they were most like.  Of course, he would have to make sure that they knew the differences between a piano and an organ. At a piano you can just sit down and play the notes. At an organ you can press the pedals, pull out all the stops, strike all the notes. Nothing. No music at all. Do what you will, all you get is a disappointing muffled clatter. You have to switch on the wind. When the wind is blowing through those hollow wooden brassy pipes, then beautiful music can be made. Without the wind, the organ is lifeless. He knew that he would not be able to explain the wind. He didn’t know where it came from or where it went to. He only knew that it was essential for the organ to produce music.  So we know that for an organ to produce good music, it needs wind. This community also needs a special kind of wind to become a loving community, to gently control the blarers, and encourage the whisperers and tremblers. This wind, however, might be called Spirit – the Spirit of that which we may consider divine – the Spirit that encourages love, communication, friendship, forgiveness, sharing, honesty. As we go through the service, perhaps you could think, not only what sort of organ pipe you are, but whether you always have your ‘wind’ turned on. |
| **Hymn**  This is number 68 in our purple hymn book, and expresses in beautiful imagery just what we want our church to be – these are four of the verses.  I dream of a church that joins in with God’s laughing  As she rocks in her rapture, enjoying her art;  She’s glad of her world, in its risking and growing;  ‘tis the child she has borne and holds close to her heart.  I dream of a church that joins in with God’s dancing  As she moves like the wind and the wave and the fire;  A church that can pick up its skirts, pirouetting,  With the steps that can signal God’s deepest desire.  I dream of a church that joins in with God’s loving  As she bends to embrace the unlovely and lost,  A church that can free, by its sharing and daring,  The imprisoned and poor, and then shoulder the cost.  God, make us a church that joins in with your living,  As you cherish and challenge, rein in and release,  A church that is winsome, impassioned, inspiring;  Lioness of your justice and lamb of your peace. |
| **Prayer**  A prayer by Richard Trudeau, that I use at every Annual General Meeting.  O God of life, help us make this church a refuge from the world, a place where the rules are different.  May this be a place where no experience is necessary -- where people are encouraged to risk new things: where a university administrator can try her hand at plumbing, if she wants, or a plumber can help manage the finances, or a banker can teach five year-olds. May this be a place where people always feel that their efforts have been worthwhile, and their energy well-spent. And may this be a place where, as in a children's football league, everyone gets to play.  O God, help us make this church a refuge from the world, a place where the rules are different.  May no one feel invisible here, or feel worried about what others might be thinking of them. May no one be bored here: if a person isn't interested in what the minister is talking about today, may he or she be excited by the music, or by a conversation at coffee hour. May this be a place where people are touched -- if not by something said, then perhaps by something sung, or by the light coming through the windows, or by the sense that the people who come here support one another. May this be a place where everyone feels safe: safe to follow their thoughts wherever they lead, safe to believe whatever they must, and safe to share whatever is on their minds and whatever is in their hearts.  O God, help us make this church a refuge from the world, a place where the rules are different -- a place where our wells can fill up again, where we can be refreshed and renewed, so that, when we return to the world with our batteries recharged, we can help transform the world into a place where the rules are different. Amen.  And let us spend a moment in silence, as we make our own prayers and commitments to this church, this congregation, this community, and this world. Let us be silent, together, now.  May we make this church a refuge from the world, a place where the rules are different - where all are welcome, all valued, and all are strengthened to go back out into the world – and transform it. Amen |
| **Reflection**  This congregation that belongs to Monton Unitarian Church has been around for a long time. From its beginnings in the second half of the seventeenth century, people have gathered, whether in open fields, or in one of the four buildings that have stood here, and now – goodness me – on video or zoom - to worship, to give thanks, to celebrate and to mourn, and to move forward in hope.  Throughout the centuries since that beginning, all the things that happen now, will have been happening over and over. Newcomers arriving, old timers dying, others leaving because we no longer feel right for them. There’ll have been numerous debates in numerous committees, about money, about policy, about personalities – there’ll have been plenty of arguments, of that we can be sure! Because that’s what living in community involves – continuous adjustment, change, debate, fallings out and reconciliations. Some things never change – and the need for change is one of them! We are feeling that now, as we improve our governance, and make changes to the building to prepare it for its next 150 years (yes, it’s 150 years old in 2025!!). And all of these things bring problems – but problems are not new to this congregation, they’ve always been dealing with something or other – though I will always say, I want the problem one committee heard about over 100 years ago, where the minister complained that a recruitment drive was needed because we were almost down to only 300 members – oh to have that as a problem!  Change can be difficult, we know that. People who have done particular jobs for long period of time need to relinquish them to others, and that can be hard – other people need to be persuaded to take jobs over – and that can be equally hard, as we all have such busy lives. And customs build up over time that can be painful to let go of – we all know the phrase, “But we’ve always done it that way!”. And it has its value – tradition carries weight – but it can also weigh communities down, and become a millstone round our necks rather than an anchor in time of storm. We need to be willing to look dispassionately at who we are and what we do – and ask ourselves why, and if there aren’t better ways, different ways, ways that maybe nurture our congregation better, or make us more effective both at how we operate internally and in what we can offer to the community around us.  At the heart of all of this is the question of why we exist – why we work so hard to continue forward. Put simply – Why Church?  On the one hand, we are here because of our personal needs – we need this community for our own support, we love the fellowship and friendship, the social gatherings, the time out each week where we can have safe space. And that’s vital – we do exist to nurture our members, to offer a place for discovery, and resting, and growth, and peace. And it is so important to have a place, particularly in this difficult, hurting world, to have a safe space, where we are welcome and celebrated for who and what we are, and where we can find comfort and encouragement. But if that is all we do, then we have missed the other half of our purpose.  We are here to serve – to serve our local community, to work for justice for those in our area who are suffering from discrimination or from poverty, who are ill or distressed or lonely, who need us to walk along side them and reassure them. We are here to serve our wider community, the global community – to stand up and speak out against injustice and prejudice and hatred, to campaign for change via our politicians and our governments. We are here to demonstrate what true beloved community can look like – to hold that torch high – and encourage others to do likewise.  Which all sounds very highfalutin and grandiose. It isn’t really. At rock bottom, we are here to love – to love each other as friends, and to love each other as strangers. And because we live in the 21st century, we need to be business-like about some of it, hence all the stuff that those of you who join the AGM zoom later will hear about Charity Commissions, and Charitable Incorporated Organisations, and chairpeople and treasurers and secretaries – we need that organisation to give us our best shot at being a loving community that also has responsibility for buildings and for finances.  But most of all we need you – we need us – because a community doesn’t exist at all without the people who covenant to it. So thank you for being here – thank you for caring – and thank you for every small thing (or big thing, ain’t turning big things down!!) that you bring to help us move forward together.  So looking from our past, through our present, and into our future, I’d like to close by reading you a Church History Service reflection by Priscilla Murdock.  On this both joyous and solemn day we have reason to celebrate; we have reason to be grateful; we have reason to be proud. We gather in the shadow of a world unsure of itself, of plans for peace lost in the plague of ambition, of a planet under threat. And yet, we have cause to be hopeful.  Our forebears have given us an example of perseverance in the face of uncertainties, of hope in the face of difficulties. This church was gathered that they might have a place to come to be together to share their hopes and their faith. It is today the church that they envisioned, but with a wider vision and perhaps a wider, if not stronger hope.  The problems of the days of our founders were hazardous but not overwhelming to a determined people; the problems we are called upon to deal with in these times are indeed difficult, but not beyond our capacities to deal with.  Our hope lies not only in the inner strength that our religion teaches us to nurture, but also in the example of those who went before to show us the way. They built a church for us, and it is ours to hand on to our children and to their children.  May the light of reason, the comfort of kindness, the depth of a growing spiritual life, the outreach of action, and the acceptance of our own goodness and potential always be our inspiration and the source of our continuing gratitude to our founders and to those who have carried the torch that we hold high.  Thank you for being you – thank you for being here – simply, thank you. Amen. |
| **Blessing**  And so to close, not just a blessing, to end this service, but a request. I ask you,  If you are proud of this church, become its advocate. If you are concerned for its future, share its message. If its values resonate deep within you, give it a measure of your devotion. This church, and this world, cannot survive without your faith, your confidence, your enthusiasm. Its destiny, and the larger hope, rests in your hands.  Our worship is over – go in peace. Amen. |