

# Ipswich Unitarians

## VARIETIES OF GIFTS

Clifford M. Reed, minister

*Ipswich Unitarian Meeting House, Membership Service, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2012*

A favourite reading of mine for a Membership Service such as this is Paul's account, in I Corinthians 12, of the variety of gifts and the variety of roles that are to be found in a congregation, a community of faith. Paul believed that the church, meaning the community of men and women who gather regularly for worship, *is* the body of Christ- the physical resurrection embodying the Spirit that Jesus had bequeathed to them. And he taught that membership of the church – the body – is not conditional on any of the restrictions that are usually applied to membership – such as your gender, your nationality or ethnic group, your social status, your wealth or lack of it, your religious background or the language you speak.

In the church, as Paul preached it, all of its members enjoy spiritual equality, both women and men\*, whatever their social status outside it, and all are equally honoured and valued. We may not agree with Paul on everything, but surely his concept of the church community as a single body, united by a spiritual bond that transcends all divisions, remains true for us. And it is not a narrow, restrictive bond. It is flexible. It allows for diversity of thought, diversity of the particulars of belief, and all the rich diversity that human nature presents us with. But there are things that it does not allow for.

The uniting bond of faith and spirit does not allow for the things that are hurtful, unloving, and unkind; the things that are malicious, mean, and cruel; the things that are arrogant, hard-hearted, and inhumane; the things that are narrow-minded, bigoted, and self-righteous. None of these things belongs in a community such as this, and when they do occur, it is cause for shame and repentance.

None of this means that a community such as ours, for all that we share, is – or could be, or should be – uniform. We value our diversity, and that includes our diversity of opinion and experience in matters of faith. But not only in matters of faith, and this takes me back to Paul. He writes about what he calls, “varieties of gifts”, “varieties of service”, and “varieties of activity” – in all of which the same Spirit, the same God, is active. These gifts, as Paul saw them, include, “the gift of wise speech”; the gift of “putting the deepest knowledge into words”; the gifts of faith, healing, prophecy, and so on. But these gifts are not all to be found in any one person. They are distributed throughout the community, with one person proficient in one gift, the next person in another, and so on. All the gifts are valued and to be the recipient of one doesn't make you superior to the recipient of another. As Paul writes, “All these gifts are the activity of one and the same Spirit, distributing them to each individual at will.” (I Corinthians 12: 11)

Paul likens the gifts and those who receive them, to the many organs in the human body. None could function independently of the whole. The whole could not function properly, if at all, without every one of its organs. As Paul writes: “But God has combined the various parts of the body, giving special honour to the humbler parts, so that there might be no division in the body, but that all its parts might feel the same concern for one another.” (I Corinthians 12: 24-25)

This is a warning for anyone who might be tempted to feel that they are rather higher up the food-chain because of the gifts and talents with which they have been blessed!

# Ipswich Unitarians

Paul goes on to talk about particular roles that members of the community might be called to fulfil. He lists them in a certain order but this should not be taken to mean that the individual whom, as Paul puts it, “God has appointed” to be an apostle is therefore superior the individual who “God has appointed” to be a prophet, or a teacher, or any of the other roles which he mentions. Some gifts, some roles may be (or seem to be) more crucial for the functioning of the community than others but this doesn’t confer superiority on the person appointed to fulfil them – only a greater responsibility! In any case, we can’t all do the same jobs! As Paul puts it, with a rhetorical flourish: “Are all apostles? All prophets? All teachers?...Do all have gifts of healing?...” (I Corinthians 12: 30)

So, there are varieties of gifts within the church community and there are varieties of jobs to do. We are not all suited to do all the jobs! But we are all suited to do something, just as each organ of the body has its function, however modest, even insignificant, it may seem. And the life and work of the religious community depends on everyone using their particular gifts and talents to make a contribution, even if that is no more than being part of the worshipping congregation on a Sunday morning. Simply to be here; to add your voice to the singing, your devotion to the prayers, your person to the fellowship, is to contribute more than might be imagined.

But, of course, our community – like all others – has more roles to fulfil for those with the gifts, the time, and the good health to do so. We may not have *designated* “apostles” and “prophets” jobs to do, but we do need people to be our trustees – to take responsibility for the efficient administration of our affairs. And from among them we need people to take responsibility for our finances, our property (including this wonderful Meeting House), our membership matters, our interaction with the wider movement and the wider community, and so on. And this not just about those elected to be trustees, who are, after all, simply members of the Meeting.

Being a member of this community should not be onerous. It should be rewarding, joyful, uplifting, and supportive of one’s personal and spiritual life. But if that is to be true for everyone then, in whatever way is most appropriate for their situation and capability, everyone must play their part.

In all voluntary organisations, and religious ones are no exception, the burdens can (and usually do) sometimes fall too heavily on the willing few. But a community where we all do something - however modest it may seem - appropriate to our ability and situation, is a much livelier, healthier, and more stimulating place than one where this is not the case. This Meeting *is* a community where willing people play their parts in keeping it vital and welcoming, but that doesn’t mean that more could not be done by more of us.

Simple things like doing a reading, lighting the chalice, arranging the flowers, and making coffee after service, all enhance our Sunday morning worship and fellowship. And contributing to worship - indeed, arranging and conducting worship – are likely to become all the more necessary in the not too distant future. But this is not something to be dreaded! To *join with others* in taking responsibility for an act of worship – the core activity of this Meeting – can and should be a rewarding and enjoyable activity, one in which those hidden “gifts of the Spirit” are discovered and deployed. And it is in sharing all manner of tasks that the community’s spirit is made manifest, transforming what might appear to be a chore into something enriching, something to be enjoyed.

There are actually so many ways to contribute the life of this Meeting, far from all of them directly related to our Sunday worship, that they cannot be listed here. So many ways to join in

# Ipswich Unitarians

making this community more loving and caring, more outward-looking and spiritually dynamic, more able to project its message and values into the wider world, than it already is.

To be a member here is to be a part of all this, whatever the contribution that one makes, whatever the skills, interests, and ideas that one adds to the mix. And, as I said earlier, that includes just being here!

We are one body sharing one Spirit, one shared commitment to the values we have reaffirmed here today. May each of us, as members of the one body, “feel the same concern for one another,” that Paul spoke of. And, as he puts it: “If one part suffers, we all suffer together; if one flourishes, all rejoice together.” (I Corinthians 12: 36) May it be so!

\*\*\*

*\*It is often alleged that Paul was hostile towards women and their participation, on an equal basis with men, in worship and in church life. In fact this was not so. Notorious texts, like I Corinthians 14: 34-35, are almost certainly not the work of Paul and were added later by other hands at a time when the radical equality of the first Christian communities was giving way to the less enlightened norms of Greek and Roman society. We have been living with the consequences ever since!*