

Ecumenical Women's Forum: Ingathering
Rev. Diane Rollert
March 4, 2012

I am very honoured to be invited to share my perspective as a Unitarian Universalist minister at this ecumenical women's gathering. I serve as minister (or pastor) of the Unitarian Church of Montreal, in the city of Montreal, in the proud province of Quebec, in the country of Canada. I am currently on sabbatical from my congregation in Canada, and I have been in the Philippines for the past 7 weeks joyfully serving as sabbatical minister to the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Philippines. I have been deeply moved by all I have experienced here, especially the opportunities I have had to meet and work with the women and youth here. There is much that is culturally different between us, and so much that we share in common through our faith.

Unitarian Universalism is a tradition that began nearly 500 years ago during the Christian Reformation in Europe. In fact, we can trace our Unitarian and Universalist roots back as far as the days of the Roman Empire. We have been a small but steady religious movement, and our members have always had a powerful effect on the wider history that surrounds us.

At the core of our faith is the affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Our ancestors built our faith on the belief in a loving God who loves us equally, and who, out of love, will save all human souls – what we call universal salvation. We believe that we are all born with the capacity to do good or evil in our lives, and it is up to us to develop our capacity for goodness. This is the work that we must do with the precious gift of life we receive. We must strive to live meaningful and just lives, so that we can be the hands of God here on earth. Our ancestors also taught us that God gave us the gift of reason, and so we are called to seek the truth and to question, especially in the face of injustice. From our ancestors, we learned the importance of the teachings of Jesus, who showed us that the whole world is Jericho Road, and so we are called to go out into the world in peace, to have courage, to strengthen the fainthearted, to help the suffering, and to honour all beings.

It is our core theology that teaches us that women are equal to men; that women, like men, have inherent worth and dignity. Thus, we have long welcomed women into our ministry and as our leaders. In fact, in 1863, a Universalist woman, the Rev. Olympia Brown, became the very first woman to graduate from an established theological school and the first woman to be fully ordained as a minister within a Protestant tradition. That was in 1863! Very early or very late, depending on how you look at it. Olympia Brown went on to serve many churches, and became a key leader in the struggle for women's right to vote in the United States during the late 19th Century. Since Olympia Brown's day, Unitarian Universalism has become the first denomination to have a majority of female ministers. Women have brought both depth and balance to our ministry and are revitalizing our faith.

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Coming to the Philippines to work side-by-side with Rev. Rebecca Quimada Siennes has been a humbling and inspiring experience. I have seen Rev. Rebecca in action as she deals with the double standard between men and women, and as she speaks out courageously for the rights of women. She continually reminds me what an important struggle it is to stay true to our principles to honour women as much as we honour men.

While here in the Visayas, I have met brave women who are working hard to raise their children, to feed their families and who dream of educating themselves and their daughters. I have heard stories of the inequities here, and yes, they are similar to problems in my own country, as privileged as we may seem to be in North America. Women everywhere face the challenges of domestic violence; they face the need for greater choices in planning their families, and they face the lack of educational opportunities and work opportunities. We know from many studies, that the more women have education and the fewer children they have, the more economically viable and healthy their communities will be.

The right to food, to work, and to information about reproductive health are matters that speak to my faith as a Unitarian Universalist. To be fruitful and multiple, yes, this was God's message in the Bible. But when the number of people upon this earth become too many to clothe, house and feed – when the number of people upon this earth become too many for the earth to sustain -- then we are no longer fruitful. We must reconsider our relationship to this earth, and what it means to faithfully serve God. In my faith, the right to carefully plan our families is a sacred trust, necessary so that all our children will have enough to eat and enough opportunities to live full, rewarding lives.

As women of faith, no matter what our theologies may be, I believe that our greatest responsibility is what we teach our children -- whether they are our own biological children, or the children of our communities. The values we pass on to our daughters and to our sons can have the power to change the world. If we model the courage speak out against injustice, our children will learn to live courageously and justly. Our daughters will learn that they do not have to live with violence. Our sons will learn new ways to solve problems without fists or guns. If we live with dignity and teach our children dignity, they may grow to love and honour each other equally. Our sons may gain respect for women, and our daughters may gain respect for themselves. If we teach our children how to live in peace, there may yet be peace on earth. This is the greatest task I see before us.

Thank you.