Birmingham Lecture

Living Our Mission

Living in Nineveh

the Reverend Gordon D. Gibson
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My preaching and reflection grow largely from direct experience and from reading in relatively contemporary sources. Yet there are stories and figures, images and expressions from the biblical literature that recur importantly in my thinking and my imagination.

One person from the Bible who lodged early and has lingered long in my brain is Jonah. You remember the story. In the first two verses of the Book of Jonah the word of the Lord commands him to go to Nineveh and there cry out against the wickedness of this city. By verse three Jonah has, in effect, said, "Hell no, I won't go." A storm at sea, a sojourn in the belly of a great fish, and ultimately he changes his mind and goes to Nineveh.

Because I am sensible enough to know that there are some places it is more comfortable not to go, and not to be prophetic, but where it is important to go, I have since early in my ministry had in a window near my desk a stained glass figure of the great beast of the sea, with Jonah in its belly. It is easier and more comfortable not to go to Nineveh, not to be prophetic, not to live our mission. But such avoidance has costs.

Most of us try to do enough to avoid being swallowed by a great fish. We do this, not so much to preclude being vomited up on the shore, as to live our mission, incarnate our faith. But let me suggest that we take lessons from some colleagues who did more.

In the 1950s and the early to mid 1960s Nineveh's location in America was clear. It was in the Deep South. A joke in the August, 1965, issue of Ebony magazine, an issue devoted to "The White Problem in America," went like this: "A Yale divinity student is awakened in the middle of the night by a voice from Heaven. 'Go to Mississippi! Go to Mississippi!' the voice keeps commanding. 'All by myself?' the frightened divinity student wants to know. 'Have no fear,' the voice reassures. 'I'll be with you -- as far as Memphis.'"

Some of us resisted the call to go to the Nineveh of the Deep South. Some answered the call and made brief but deeply prophetic forays, including our significant presence in Selma, Alabama, in 1965. I want to hold up for our edification and our inspiration the reality of colleagues in ministry who did not just visit Nineveh; they lived there.

Living in Nineveh is a whole different experience than just flying in, delivering your message, and hoping to be alive to head home a day later.

One wonderful example of a quiet but prophetic presence across the South was Alfred Hobart, first minister of the congregation here in Birmingham. Alfred also served congregations in New Orleans and in Charleston, South Carolina, and twice served in the District office.
Alfred, a Canadian by birth, became a Unitarian minister in 1928, but had dropped out of parish ministry for a time after going through a divorce -- a real deficit for a minister in those days, which were also the days when the Great Depression was devastating church budgets. He spent the next fifteen years in social work. In 1933, while working in Alabama to set up FDR's public welfare system, he met and married Mary Aymar Colley.

He was in New Orleans as a social worker when asked to fill in part-time as interim minister at the First Unitarian Church of New Orleans, and was then (this was a different day, with different rules) called as minister. In New Orleans between 1945 and 1950 he was a board member of the Urban League and chaired a Committee on Race Relations. During his ministry there the first African American member joined the congregation, having presented a letter of introduction from Frederick May Eliot, President of the American Unitarian Association.

Alfred went from New Orleans to the other southern Unitarian congregation that survived from before the Civil War: Charleston, South Carolina. He served there for four years, working quarter-time for the AUA as Southeast Regional Director servicing an area that now has three or four Districts.

Then, in 1954, the same year as the Supreme Court's school Desegregation decision, Brown vs. Board of Education, Alfred Hobart moved to Birmingham where he served for ten years. In those ten years he chaired the Council on Human Relations, one of the few bi-racial organizations in the city, was a board member of the Interracial Brotherhood of Clergy, and served a congregation containing some members who thought he was too outspoken and other members who thought he was doing too little. Looking back at a 1958-59 American Unitarian Association Yearbook, I note that at that point Birmingham's 171 member congregation was the only Unitarian church in Alabama, with five fellowships adding 113 additional Unitarians around the state – far fewer people in the whole state than are in this room now. In spite of these slim numbers, the church, with Alfred Hobart's leadership, was a distinctive and powerful voice and action center for justice in a city better known for repression and injustice. He was harassed by Bull Connor's police force. He is quietly lauded in Diane McWhorter's recent book on Birmingham in the civil rights era, Carry Me Home, where she mentions "the Unitarian church, whose minister, Alfred Hobart, had been the only local white clergyman to speak out frankly in support of Brown." (p. 169)

Alfred Hobart finished out his ministerial career in the district office and then as the first minister in Fort Myers, Florida. Charles White McGehee, one of the five people he sent into the ministry (son Jim Hobart being another one), wrote in an obituary: "Soft spoken, scholarly, and compassionate, Alfred Hobart was unyieldingly dedicated to human justice. He was a builder and sustainer who especially played a significant role in the development of Unitarian Universalism in the Southeast."

Spencer Lavan, familiar to virtually all of us from his commendable recent service at the helm of Meadville/Lombard Theological School, had a brief taste of life in Nineveh. In 1962, fresh from Harvard Divinity School, he was called to Charleston, South Carolina. He endured a rugged yet productive two years there. What do I mean, "rugged yet productive"? Let me give you three specifics.

In June of 1963, acting on behalf of the Thomas Jefferson UUMA Chapter, Spencer wrote to the manager of the Fort Sumter Hotel in Charleston, deploring the hotel calling police to arrest African Americans seeking to be guests at the hotel. He told the manager that the UUMA chapter would be moving its meetings to another hotel, which had chosen not to take such actions. In response, he received letters from two nominal members of his congregation identifying themselves as stockholders in the Fort Sumter Hotel.

In 1964, after Spencer's resignation had been received by the congregation, one member circulated a 29 page mimeographed document. Paragraph five of that document begins, "For nine years I have been a member of this Church and for three years I have been a member of the John Birch Society." I don't think
I need to elaborate on the fact that this member was a source of conflict.

At the same time, during Spencer's ministry in Charleston, Guy and Candy Carawan had been actively involved in the Unitarian Church, and had put on concerts in the Gage Hall parish house. Guy Carawan is significant as one of the people in the line of transmission that transformed the hymn, "I'll Be All Right" into the anthem of the Freedom Movement, "We Shall Overcome." Other members of the congregation also became significantly engaged in issues of racial justice during Spencer's ministry.

Robert Nelson West, later to become President of the UUA, was a native of the South, Virginia to be exact. Following his graduation from Starr King School for the Ministry in 1957, he was called to Knoxville, Tennessee. Tennessee Valley Unitarian Church, a 1949 product of the Unitarian fellowship movement, was at least the fourth attempt to have a Unitarian congregation in Knoxville. By the time Bob West became its minister, Dick Henry's eight-year ministry had built the congregation's membership over 200.

Knoxville during the years Bob West served there went through sit-ins aimed at the desegregation of public facilities, ranging from lunch counters on up. Bob was centrally involved in negotiations trying to avoid the need for sit-ins. When those negotiations failed (in large part because national headquarters of some chain stores refused to give formal endorsement to proposed local agreements), Bob was involved in the planning and execution of the sit-ins and "selective shopping." A significant number of lay people in the Knoxville congregation also joined in these efforts, as well as in other work on racial justice over many years. Successors such as Ken MacLean and John Buehrens found the ground well plowed for fruitful planting.

Stories such as these should challenge us. If these colleagues could do such a job of living their mission -- our mission -- in an inhospitable environment, could not we live our mission with more clarity, with more vitality, with more courage in our chosen environments? If they could hear the call to be prophetic even as they lived in the Nineveh of their day, and respond to the call, who are we to feign deafness or practice cowardly compromise in situations much less fraught with danger?

Let me give you a slightly lengthier collegial story as a way of elaborating on this theme. Albert D'Orlando followed Alfred Hobart in the New Orleans pulpit. Albert had been born and raised in the Boston area. He reached adulthood during the Great Depression and worked in a family-run business for eight years between finishing high school and going to college and seminary at Tufts. In 1945 he began serving two small New Hampshire congregations, and in 1950 was called to New Orleans. Albert has written, "the situation there, at that time, was to give form and direction to my ministry during all the ensuing years. It helped me to understand that a minister does not always choose the issues that will define his or her ministry; often he or she is pushed right into them. Then we do what we have to do, simply because there is no other choice."

What was "the situation there, at that time"? First Unitarian Church of New Orleans was the only Unitarian church in a radius of almost 500 miles. Shortly after Albert arrived in New Orleans, two African-American Unitarians moved there to fill professional positions with the Urban League and the YWCA. Unlike the prior African-American to join the congregation, they opted to participate fully. This led to some rises, such as the Sunday when the Women's Alliance had padlocked the cups and saucers, which were their property, so that they would not be available for use should the new members choose to take part in the coffee hour -- one of the new-fangled innovations of the new minister. (Paper cups from the neighborhood grocery solved the logistical, if not the social, problem.) The treasurer was unhappy with the direction of change and circulated letters asking that pledges be reduced to $2 each in hopes that this would drive the new minister away promptly. (Because the treasurer's viewpoint was a minority one, his letters actually resulted in an increase in pledges.)
Within a few years it was apparent that issues of desegregation and integration were going to become more acute, not less. Albert pushed the congregation to decide whether, when crunch time came, it could act as a corporate body. With just one dissenting vote, the congregation voted to take the course of speaking and acting as a congregation. It was well that they had done this, for in the crisis of desegregating the New Orleans schools, and in other critical situations in Louisiana and Mississippi, the First Unitarian Church of New Orleans raised from other Unitarian Universalists and disbursed where needed $25,000 - a very substantial sum in that day. But Albert did note of the one dissenter from the congregational consensus that this man was the person who recruited a young fellow named David Duke into the Ku Klux Klan.

From time to time Albert did aggravate or antagonize some within the congregation. I am not going to retrospectively and posthumously try to analyze each and very case of aggravation. Clearly there are some we can be very glad he irritated, for they were more enamored of the area's folkways and mores than they were convinced of the clear social implications of their purported faith.

Albert most certainly aggravated and antagonized some in the broader world beyond the church:

- In 1958 he was ordered to testify before the McCarthyite House Committee on Un-American Activities because a New Hampshire informant had identified him and his wife as Communists.

- Like many of our activist colleagues in the South, Albert got his share and then some of harassing and threatening phone calls. Giving the 25-year speech at the Seattle General Assembly, Albert shared the story of a 3 a.m. phone call with the message, "If you don't get out in three minutes your home will be blown up." His wife woke up, sat up, and searched his face for the meaning of the phone call. He put his hand over the mouthpiece of the phone and reassured her, "It's all right dear, you can go back to sleep; it's only a suicide." She lay her head on the pillow for a couple of seconds and then bolted upright again: "Only a suicide!"

- And then, in March of 1965, as he sat in the study at the parsonage on a Saturday night composing a memorial service for the Rev. James Reeb, a bomb did indeed go off right under his window. Fortunately there were no injuries and no major damage to the parsonage. Two months later dynamite destroyed the front of the church, again with no injuries and no damage that was irreparable.

Albert, in the midst of an active retirement that continued until his death at 83 in 1998, responded to the question, "Would you do it all over again?" "Yes," he said, "of course I would, for I cannot imagine another calling through which I could have given emphasis to human worth and dignity and which, in doing so, would have opened the way for me to give meaning to my own life."

I hope that each one of us would answer similarly. I hope that we would answer similarly to the call to go to Nineveh, to speak prophetically there. I hope that we would consider becoming more than transient visitors, but perhaps residents of wherever Nineveh might be in our day.

I think that we can learn from the stories of these brave colleagues of an earlier era that perhaps we can be braver than we generally are. They are certainly not our only potential teachers. We could stand to learn from some of the ferociously brave African American clergy and lay leadership of the Freedom Movement, people such as the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth of Birmingham. We could learn from the stories of resistance to Nazism; names such as Norbert Capek, Viktor Frankl, James Luther Adams and Dietrich Bonhoeffer are among those that come to mind. We could learn from the survival of our Transylvanian colleagues through decades of Nazi rule and Communist oppression, a set of stories which Nana Kratochvil is using a sabbatical to research. But we are here in the Deep South, in the shadow of Unitarian Universalist colleagues, some still living, who helped in many ways to create a vibrant set of
congregations in a society that has undergone remarkable change. Let us, at the very least, learn from them.

And what might we learn from those who lived prophetically in the Nineveh of mid-twentieth-century America? Let me suggest four conclusions, and leave you free to draw others of your own devising.

1. In any situation there are resources for the clear and prophetic practice of our Unitarian Universalist faith. While we should be wise, even circumspect, in the battles we choose to fight, the prophetic words we seek to utter, we should never permit ourselves to be situationally shy and retiring.

2. (Something Jonah also discovered): Sometimes even Ninevites are amazingly receptive to an appropriately prophetic voice. And, then again, sometimes there's obstruction and opposition from the places where none should exist.

3. In the long run, in the larger picture, there can be very positive results from the active, prophetic practice of Unitarian Universalism. When we do not experience success it is most often from not having been forthright and forthcoming enough with our message, with our prophetic voice, with prophetic living.

4. In the short run, there can be negative consequences to a prophetic living of our faith. However, these negative consequences grow if we spend time obsessing over them rather than working around them. Rather than obsessing about possible negative consequences of living prophetically, living prophetically even in Nineveh, we should just get over it and live as we should.

Remember the story. The alternative to prophetic living is to be fish barf.

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