

Alternative Movements Project (aka Alternative Ministries Project)

Non-theocentric Research Team: Phil Baisley, Joel Tishken, Sean Benjamin Parker

Two kinds of alternative movements were studied. Joel studied an Indianapolis group called Atheists Etc that meets primarily on Wednesdays and Sundays in various locations around the city. He also met with representatives of the Humanist Society of Central Ohio and the Miami Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. Phil studied the Union Chapel, a combination of three organizations – one religious, two non-religious – that utilize the 160 year old non-conformist church in Islington, London. Phil and Sean Parker studied a pub on the southern coast of England that houses a monthly discussion night they thought might exemplify an “a-theology pub” but turned out to be more of a local movement of art, inclusion, and spirituality.

Joel will report first. (His interview notes are included below.)

Atheist Etc is part of Meetup.com and was founded in 2009. They have 1125 members in Meetup and has meet more than 1000 times since founding. The group meets twice weekly, every Sunday morning at the same café and every Wed. evening at a rotating restaurant. I would estimate that approximately 1/3 of members had always been nontheist and about 2/3s were former Christians. Those at the gatherings were almost exclusively white, and well educated with largely white collar jobs. I suspect the demographics have more to do with the fact that most members come from Anderson and northeast Indianapolis, and it not necessarily a comment on non-theism in Indiana. I was a guest at two gatherings, one on a Sunday and one on a Wed., and interviewed two of the group’s leaders, both of which were former seminarians.

To broaden our sample, I also conducted phone interviews with two individuals from other groups. “Aaron” began identifying as a secular humanist in 1999 when he joined Unitarian Universalism, though he indicated that has probably been his

philosophy most of his life. He founded a Drinking Liberally chapter in Dayton, attends the Socrates Café, that meets at a Jewish temple in Centerville, and is a member of the Miami Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. Second, “Josh” from Columbus, Ohio, is a lifelong atheist most active in the Humanist Community of Central Ohio, but is also part of Life After Belief and Recovering from Religion.

Why do nontheists gather and organize?

- 1) The number one reason was quite evident: for fellowship, community and a sense of belonging. Everyone I spoke with made it very clear that this is what motivated them and was the reason they most commonly heard from others too.
- 2) Second, for some, the groups served as an oasis and safe space from having to deal with Christians and Christianity in other parts of their lives. They could express themselves freely and engage in conversational topics that interest them without needing to worry about self-righteous evangelism or moralizing from a Christian perspective.
- 3) Third, for a minority of individuals, nontheist groups could serve a healing function as they moved from a formerly theist worldview to a nontheist one, with new relationships, new understandings of self, human nature, causality, and so forth.

I asked all the interviewees, what might a seminary offer nontheists, as individuals attending them, but also in general terms as a community?

All of them were clear that a seminary would do well by humanity in training people to care for everyone, to be ministerial toward any individual they will encounter, not just those of their denomination or same faith. A seminarian or minister will not spend their days only encountering people who are just like them or share their theological assumptions. A seminary, then, could become a “melding organization,” a place where people learn about and gain respect for the needs and beliefs of others – the entire cross-section of America. To put it differently, seminaries could offer a generic pastoral and leadership skill set to every student regardless of where they and the care receiver fell on the theism-nontheism spectrum. Providing leadership and care to people is a universal human need that transcends religion.

Second, theists needs to be educated about nontheists. This means they need to understand that nontheists are not scary amoral individuals. Josh referenced polls where Americans indicate they would trust their child with a Christian criminal before an atheist. Christian faith does not make you a superior human being, morally or otherwise, and a lack of Christian faith does not make you inferior. People can be good without god, and having god in your life is also no guarantee a person is good. Given rising numbers of nontheists in the country, it would be in the best interest of seminaries to train all students about the reality, needs, and kinds of nontheism, free of stereotype and nonsense, because seminarians will be regularly engaging nontheists in their lives outside the church.

Third, Samantha and Robert from Atheists Etc. noted that despite having attended seminary, their seminary education had provided them with no practical skills

for leading an organization, which is what ministers do. Here they were, leaders of a organization, admittedly of a different kind, but organizational leaders nonetheless, without knowledge of leadership, organizing, organizational psychology, marketing and outreach, safety... How many theology and bible credits does a person need? I was grateful the question was rhetorical, as I surely had no answer to that question.

Phil's Report on Union Chapel



I first heard of Union Chapel as a concert venue in London known for its excellent acoustics and the variety of musical genres exhibited there, from doom metal to Tom Jones. It was only upon visiting their website that I learned that Union Chapel was also a functioning church in the Congregationalist tradition as well as an outreach to the homeless in that part of London. This intrigued me as I estimated that most of the many volunteers it would take to staff such endeavors would probably not be religious folk, and yet they were a vital part of a nominally religious organization.

I spent the better part of five days at the Chapel. There I learned how three organizations with different goals and leadership teams are working together to create a unique form of what I would call ministry. Perhaps I should say four organizations because it was the Union Chapel Project – a group of concerned local people – who came together to save the building from demolition in the 1980s. The Union Chapel

Project is the overarching charity that keeps the building going and makes sure the other three organizations have a place to do their work.



Union Chapel Church is a member of the Congregational Federation and is a self-described “liberal, inclusive, non-hierarchical and non-conformist in their theology” church that “celebrates diversity by welcoming all people no matter what their race, gender, sexuality or faith background might be.”

In interviewing their co-pastor, Karen Stallard, as well as their church archivist, and attending Sunday morning worship and the Wednesday drop in time, I learned that the church is really too small to support multiple pastors and have such a large outreach. It is only by partnering with the other parts of Union Chapel that they can remain a vital congregation.



One example of this partnering is on Wednesdays. True to their welcoming nature, Union Chapel Church throws opens its front doors on Wednesday mornings and invites people inside the vestibule for hot beverages, snacks, and conversation. There homeless people mingle with businesspersons on coffee break and talk about whatever interests them. Sometimes Karen or the other pastor will ask a leading question to kick start a conversation. The day I was there, a newly homeless man – one who had never had to ask for help before – was welcomed and later introduced to the Margins Project.



The Margins Project is the social action arm of Union Chapel. It is a proverbial “registered charity” not under the jurisdiction of the church or its denomination. Margins partners with local churches to provide emergency shelter during the winter months. It also runs a five-month Café Training Program that helps homeless people get back on their feet by training them as chefs and helping them find employment in local restaurants. They also run art workshops open to anyone during the week.



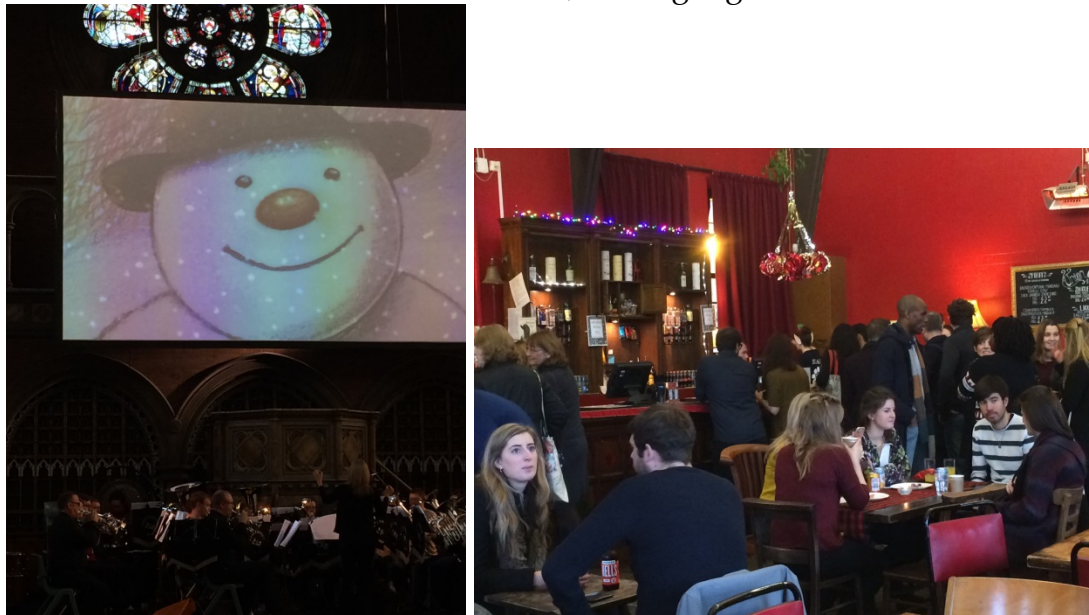
None of the employees and volunteers I interviewed expressed any specific faith background, and yet many of them felt a spiritual connection through the work they did.

The concert venue is the most recognizable of the three parts of Union Chapel. They offer a variety of musical programs every day except Wednesdays and Sundays, which they reserve for church activities. The venue employs about a dozen people and uses dozens more volunteers two act as ushers, snack sellers, back stage assistants, and bartenders. Yes, the Chapel offers full bar service at most events.



The best example of the three parts of Union Chapel being, as one employee described, “separate but integrated,” occurred on the Sunday afternoon I was there. It was when Union Chapel hosted a big community Christmas celebration. The Venue employees and volunteers did what they do best: music, and moving large crowds in an organized manner. The main auditorium featured a performance by a concert band. The highlight of the afternoon was a showing of the movie *The Snowman* with live orchestral

soundtrack. Venue staff also tended bar, serving regular drinks as well as mulled wine.



Student chefs from the Margins Project cooked and sold various quiches and other delicious food to the hundreds of attendees. Volunteers from the Church played the parts of Father Christmas and some elves and gave small gifts to about 100 children. All the while, the two pastors “worked the crowd” as a welcoming presence for all.





Knowing how many church buildings, some historic, sit unused; how many congregations are too small to stay afloat, how many people wish they had a location out of which to do community outreach, and how many bands are looking for concert venues that aren't just a bar, I'm wondering that the Union Chapel model might be a way for some ministry entrepreneurs to use their gifts and resources.



Phil's Report on SeaFiSh

SeaFiSh bar was my other focus of research. Knowing my British friend Sean Parker was a member of a non-theistic discussion group when he lived in Istanbul, I was hoping he could give me some contacts I could learn from about atheist, agnostic, and humanist groups. He did better than that. He arranged for me to go to his latest project, the SeaFiSh bar in Bognor Regis on the southern coast of England. SeaFiSh, he told me, has a monthly group called Speakeasy that sounded like what I was looking for. I made plans to go to England to visit Union Chapel and to spend some time at SeaFiSh. Sean sweetened the pot, and made the bar seem even more "churchy" by scheduling a guest speaker for Speakeasy the night I'd be there. That speaker was Jon Morter, described as a "social media hellraiser." Morter is the DJ who challenged Simon Cowell's *X Factor*'s reign over Christmas number ones by creating a media campaign that boosted Rage Against the Machine's *Killing in the Name of Love* to number one on the pop charts in December 2009. It was fun to share a stage with him.



I spent three days with Sean, his business partners Rachel and David, and the patrons of SeaFiSh bar. The bar was created to give a formerly vibrant resort town some new life by encouraging participation in the arts. SeaFiSh, along with selling alcohol and food, is a concert venue, a meeting place for philosophical discussions, an art gallery, and a place for poetry and prose readings. In the process, it became a place where all classes in the very class conscious English town could gather comfortably; a place where people really listened to one another, and a place where, as three different women and one man reported, a single woman could safely go at night.

Of the three SeaFiSh partners, Sean is agnostic (he told me he'd like to be an atheist, but he just isn't sure), David is nominally a Christian (the "Jesus is just all right with me variety), and Rachel is a self-described "born again Christian." The patrons range from non-theist to spiritual-but-not-religious to Pelagian, and yet about half of them felt a

sense of spiritual connection or sacredness about SeaFiSh, most relating it to the sense of welcome and inclusion they feel there.

An example of how all this comes together occurred the night I gave a short talk about my project and then introduced Jon Morter as the main event. Following Jon's talk and my interviews, a few people stuck around. One was a woman whose first visit to SeaFiSh was that night. A single mother, she lives nearby but rarely goes out. Getting her mother to babysit, she ventured out to SeaFiSh and immediately felt at home. She stayed and when Neil, a local musician who plays "John Lennon" in a Beatles tribute band, started playing Lennon songs, she joined all of us in singing our hearts out. Later, Neil engaged Rachel and me in a discussion about the "Rapture" and end times theology. Only at SeaFiSh. Maybe that's why Rachel would like to see the upstairs room at SeaFiSh be turned into a meditation room for quiet reflection, solitude, spiritual refreshment, and maybe someday, spiritual direction. Sean's okay with that because it suits SeaFiSh's atmosphere even though he isn't into the spiritual stuff.



Again, I see SeaFiSh as a model for entrepreneurial ministers to use their gifts, passions, and resources to create a welcoming place for various ministries.