

What's in a Name?

Rev. Lisa Doege

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Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

One of the first things I did when I came here to Nora back in September was to start asking around about the name of the church. Everywhere I looked I saw a different name. The directional sign out on 15 says Nora UU Church. The signs on 257, all three of them, say Nora Unitarian Universalist Church. The one at the foot of the driveway says Nora Unitarian Church. And historical documents say Nora Free Christian Church. Now I'm both naturally curious and a stickler for accuracy and details, so, as I said, I asked around. Did Nora change its name legally and if so what is the new name?

It took awhile--probably I wasn't asking the right people--but Darrell tracked it down for me. During Sarah Oelberg's tenure as your minister here the church name was legally changed to *Nora Unitarian Universalist Church*. Maybe I was the only one who didn't know that. Maybe I'm the only one who cares very much about the official legal name. Or maybe I was simply reluctant to recognize it.

What's in a name? That which we call a rose By any other name would smell as sweet, Shakespeare penned for all time in *Romeo and Juliet*. But marketers and those who name products know the limits of that supposed truth. And Shakespeare himself knew it too. In the same play he also wrote *O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo? Deny thy father and refuse thy name; Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love, And I'll no longer be a Capulet.*

Names do matter. It matters that this church here on the hill in rural Hanska is now called *Nora Unitarian Universalist Church*, no longer *Nora Free Christian Church*. Clarity and specificity in naming are important. It makes sense that *Christian* was dropped from the name, as it was no longer descriptive of the character of this congregation. And it makes sense that *Unitarian Universalist* was added to the name, as the congregation is indeed a member congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Brevity in naming is wise as well--Tikki tikki tembo's Mom learned that the hard way. *Nora Unitarian Universalist Church*, long as it is, is about as short as it could be while both preserving the historical *Nora* and adding the contemporary *Unitarian Universalist*. So, the name you chose is a good one. Yet a little part of me wishes you'd preserved the "free" designation as part of your name.

Milan Kundera, author of the *Unbearable Lightness of Being*, has said, *We don't know when our name came into being or how some distant ancestor acquired it. We don't understand our name at all, we don't know its history and yet we bear it with exalted fidelity, we merge with it, we like it, we are ridiculously proud of it as if we had thought it up ourselves in a moment of brilliant inspiration.*

That may be true with regard to our surnames, or most of them anyway, but place names and organization names are often traceable. *Unitarian Universalist Association*, for example, came into being from the merger of the *Universalist Church of America* and the *American Unitarian Association*, almost fifty years ago. Most of our thousand or so congregations are now *Unitarian Universalist* congregations, even if their names continue to reflect their earliest roots as either a *Unitarian* congregation or a *Universalist* congregation. The few exceptions are those historically Universalist congregations that have deliberately chosen to highlight that heritage and call themselves *Universalist Unitarian*. These congregations have a valid concern. With a name as unwieldy as Unitarian Universalist, we are frequently subject to the shortening of our name--by outsiders and by insiders--to simply Unitarian. The Universalist part is too often forgotten. But, the old English major in me argues, these congregations are also missing an important nuance to our merged name. As it stands, with the *Unitarian* coming first and the *Universalist* coming second, grammatically speaking, our name gives greatest weight to the *Universalist*. In their current order *Unitarian* is the adjective modifying the noun *Universalist*. So, a literal, technical reading of our name tells us that we are Universalists--who happen to also have a Unitarian bent to our theology. It is a very subtle point--one I've never heard anyone other than myself make, so perhaps it is entirely irrelevant--but it does illustrate that names and the evolution of names matter.

Those handful of dissatisfied Norwegian Lutherans who founded Nora Church back in 1881 settled upon the name *Nora Free Christian Church* for sound reasons. *Nora* paid homage to their Norwegian heritage. *Christian* described their theology at that time. And *Free* signaled all that had led them to break from Lake Hanska Lutheran Church--primarily dissatisfaction with church authority.

Perhaps by the time the name was changed a hundred years later the sense of urgency about freedom from hierarchy and authority had faded. Or perhaps dropping the *free* was a simple case of attempting to keep an already too long name as short as possible. Whatever the reason I don't fault the decision, but I am, as I said, a bit wistful about what was lost when that decision was made.

As we heard in this morning's reading from Alice Blair Wesley, the free church tradition is of much longer standing and much broader influence than a single 130 year old break-away congregation. We sometimes sum up the birth of American Unitarianism with a comment about how the same people who didn't want a monarch dictating their political life didn't want church authority dictating their beliefs or religious life. And while that it is true, it too fails to take into account the fact that the free church movement on this continent was already a century old, and in other parts of the world older even than that.

One of the many things non-UUs don't "get" about our tradition is one of the same things new comers to Unitarian Universalism love about our tradition--that is our distinctly, and systemic, non-authoritarian character. Individual churches don't dictate belief, habit, or ritual to individual members, and the larger body, the UUA, doesn't dictate belief, habit, or ritual to individual churches. Just as we locate our theological

authority in the province of the individual believer, so too we locate our governing authority in the province of the individual congregation. That is to say, we have congregational polity. We are not the only religious tradition with congregational polity, but it is our polity and it is unusual enough that others wonder at it.

Free church does not mean “the church where anything goes”--though at times there have been both individuals and individuals congregations who have behaved as though it did. *Free church* does not mean there is no place for a more or less predictable order of service or guidelines for acceptable procedures or a set of policies for ordering our lives together--though there are often some who wish it. *Free church* means simply and significantly only this--that the larger denominational body has no authority over the individual churches. We govern ourselves, locally, according to the needs and gifts of the local congregation.

Nora Unitarian Universalist Church is a member congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association and the Prairie Star District of the UUA. It pays dues to both bodies, and in return it receives services--the development of religious education materials, the credentialing of ministers and other religious professionals, conflict resolution, fund-raising, growth and other specialized consultations, a voice in the public sphere and so on. We benefit from our association with those bodies without being subject to their authority.

It is a sign of self-confidence and institutional maturity that Nora Unitarian Universalist Church no longer feels the need to set itself apart from its past by declaring its freedom. Yet it is a lasting gift that Nora has that declaration in its past. Whatever the signs say, whatever the legal documents say, whatever trips off your tongue, Nora has been and is and will ever be a free church. May it bear that responsibility proudly and receive that blessing with gratitude. Amen.