EDITOR’S NOTE

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the new VOICE. After nearly 20 years in its previous newsprint format, we decided it was time for a bit of a refresh. Everything you find here will also be available on our website and social media channels.

Our hope for this new format is to highlight the ideas and movements that represent and inspire our community of partners and supporters. As the largest ecumenical organization in the country, we’ve got an incredible array of voices to highlight. The word “ecumenical” communicates the idea of togetherness in light of our differences. It’s important to say in light of and not in spite of, as the saying typically goes. The point of ecumenicism is not to ignore our differences, rather it is to acknowledge and celebrate them as we work together toward shared goals and mutual understanding.

In this first issue we explore gun violence, the war in Ukraine, Evangelicalism, refugee resettlement, religion and democracy, and more. Ultimately, we want the new VOICE to go beyond Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon. We want it to tell the stories of people of faith and goodwill across Oregon and beyond.

It’s an interesting time to be a person of faith in the United States. We’re often known for what we’re against rather than what we’re for. In a culture that regularly uses Christianity as a weapon, we want to stand for something different: grace, justice and equity.

We hope you’ll embrace this new format and that it will stimulate discussion around your dinner tables and online. If you would like to contribute a future article or have a suggestion, please email us at voice@emoregon.org. We’d love to hear from you.

Kindly,
Paul LeFeber
Director of Development & Communications
If the United States did not welcome refugees, I wouldn’t be here today.

Francis Khampi is a community health worker for Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO). He also serves on the Catholic Charities board of directors.

I am a Zomi from Myanmar [formally Burma]. Zomi is one of the minority groups in Myanmar. I fled my country in 2006 due to political oppression and persecution of the Christian minority. My brother was arrested in 1998 without any reason while he was in college. This began a nightmare for my family that would last many years.

My brother was released after six years of false imprisonment. Upon his release, he fled the country. The authorities tried to hunt him down; if found, he faced life in prison. As his siblings, we had no choice but to follow in his footsteps. We fled the country as soon as we were able.

After arriving in Malaysia, we stayed in a jungle refugee camp for two years. Unfortunately, in 2008, I was arrested for not having the proper legal documentation. I was deported to Thailand and had to pay a human trafficker $1,300 to return to the refugee camp in Malaysia. In 2015, I was resettled in Portland, Oregon. I was welcomed with open arms, and now I am able to help others in my community. Even though refugees face culture shock, language barriers, and much more, we are committed to being part of our communities and integrating into the larger society. We have a desire to give for all that we have received.

Today, I am a father of three children. I am a community health worker and the leader for the Zomi Catholic Community in Portland. I volunteer at my children’s school and in my neighborhood; I also help to organize a Zomi refugee program. I was a client of Catholic Charities of Oregon and now serve on their board of directors. –

Many hardworking refugees were once called strangers, but they are now your neighbors, friends and coworkers. Most refugees believed in a brighter future and sought that future in the United States. We are grateful for the opportunity to be here. We want you to guide us, teach us, and share your experiences with us, so that we can do the same for others.

When I came to the United States as a refugee, I received resettlement support and public assistance that helped me establish a new life. The financial assistance was wisely and meaningfully spent—it gave me hope, faith and the ability to live. I hope this kind of support will continue for new refugee arrivals. It reminds me of Matthew 25:35: “For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in.”

Francis Khampi
Understanding Unitarians

BY DR. MARILYN SEWELL

Dr. Marilyn Sewell is the minister emerita of the First Unitarian Church in Portland, Ore. She is the subject of an acclaimed documentary film, “Row Faith,” and the author of 10 books, the latest of which is In Time’s Shadow: Stories about Impermanence.

H ow many times have I heard people remark, “You can believe anything and be a Unitarian Universalist.” Or someone might say, with no trace of irony, “I go to the Unitarian Universalist church because I don’t believe in organized religion.”

Contrary to popular belief, Unitarian Universalism is a religion, and one with a long and noble history. We are a free religious faith, and so have no creed. And as freedom is wont to do, our faith invites a certain degree of wackiness and abuse. But if it is the price of freedom, then I still choose freedom.

Our faith, of course, does have requirements. To become a Unitarian Universalist, you make no doctrinal promises, but you are required to do much more. You are required to choose your own beliefs—you promise, that is, to use your reason and your experience and the dictates of your conscience to decide upon your own theology, and then you are asked to actually live by that theology. In a very real sense, all theology is autobiography.

The universalism in Universalism refers to universal salvation—a very radical theological concept that emerged in an age in which revival preachers were riding through the countryside telling people that they were going to burn in hell unless they repented of their sins.

The term “Unitarian” indicates our belief that God is One, in contrast to the idea of a triune God. The concept that God is One goes beyond the controversies about the trinity, however. If God is One, then the God of the Jews and the God of the Muslims and the God of the Christians is One.

I remember a tragic incident that occurred during my ministry. One evening I was called to the hospital to be with the mother of a two-year-old child who was brain-dead after choking on a piece of chewing gum. The mother, a Unitarian Universalist, was estranged from the child’s father, who was of another faith. Leaving the hospital, I found myself in the elevator with the father’s minister, and I said to him, “Well, we can do the memorial service together.” And he responded, “No, we can’t. We don’t worship the same God.” His comment punctuated my sadness and the family estrangement. What other God could he have been thinking of?

The following are core theological convictions for Unitarian Universalists:

• We believe that human beings should be free to choose their beliefs according to their conscience.
• We believe in original goodness, with the understanding that sin is sometimes chosen, often because of pain or ignorance.
• We believe that God is One.
• We believe that revelation is ever unfolding.
• We believe the Kingdom of God is to be created here on this earth.
• We believe that Jesus was a prophet of God, and that other prophets from God have risen in other faith traditions.
• We believe that love is more important than doctrine.
• We believe that God’s mercy will reconcile all unto itself in the end.

Understanding Evangelicals

BY HANNAH SOUTER

In a world where it is so easy to make caricatures out of each other, may we learn to stay curious and truly see one another for who we really are.

Dr. Hannah Souter is pastor of Community & Spiritual Formation at New Hope Church in Portland, Ore. She also serves as the assistant director for Portland Seminary’s Institute for Pastoral and Congregational Thriving and their high school youth program, Theologia.

D efining the term evangelical is like trying to untangle last year’s Christmas lights that you promised yourself you would store properly next time. Evangelicals themselves have differing views on the primary convictions of their faith. Many would not be able to tell you what a distinctively evangelical belief even is. That might have been me before writing this article. I had to touch the word evangelical with a ten-foot pole, but after learning a bit more of its historical grounding and essential beliefs, I find the term a lot less scary.

For research purposes, Barna Group (a Christian polling firm) defines evangelical in narrow terms—identifying seven qualifying criteria in addition to meeting the requirements of the faith affiliation category “Born Again.” With those narrow criteria, only six percent of U.S. adults would be considered evangelical.

How can six percent of U.S. adults have such a gripping influence on our nation’s cultural and political landscape? In the United States, the term evangelical has become synonymous with conservatism. Whatever the flavor—religious, political, fiscal or moral—conservatism has become more of an identity marker for evangelicals than actual faith convictions.

Depending on these differing identity markers, it is more accurate to say that evangelicals make up between seven and 47 percent of the U.S. population. No wonder it feels like a big, tangled up ball of Christmas lights.

But when we start to sort through and untangle those individual strands, evangelicalism becomes much easier to work with, and even some of its beauty is redeemed. Jonathan Merritt writes for The Atlantic that “the most widely accepted definition of evangelical is probably the one put forward by historian David Bebbington in 1989.” It’s called the Bebbington quadrilateral, because it identifies evangelicals as Christians who share four main qualities:

• Biblicism: a high regard for the Bible
• Crucicentrism: a focus on Jesus’ crucifixion and its saving effects
• Conversionism: a belief that humans need to be converted
• Activism: the belief that faith should influence one’s public life

Without all the problematic trappings of conservatism and political affiliation, there is room to see how these four qualities could contribute to the broader family of Christianity emphasizing Jesus and his teaching to be “salt and light” in the world. A definition like this allows for more common ground and, hopefully, better understanding, collaboration, and partnership in our shared vision to participate in God’s redeeming, healing work in the world.

As previously noted, not all evangelicals agree. Some don’t have any theological convictions and prefer the sociopolitical definition. Regardless, my hope is to untangle evangelicalism from all it has become and celebrate its gifts to the larger whole.

In a world where it is so easy to make caricatures out of each other, may we learn to stay curious and truly see one another for who we really are.
According to Pew Research Center, over 60 percent of Americans favor stronger restrictions on assault rifles and high-capacity magazines.

Recently, President Biden signed a bipartisan gun safety bill into law. Locally, Lift Every Voice Oregon (LEVO) successfully gathered petition signatures for a gun safety measure (IP 17) to be on the November ballot. LEVO, a faith-based organization, teamed with Ceasefire Oregon to help us put it to a vote. I encourage everyone to vote in support of this ballot measure.

These are the stakes—to make a world in which all of God’s children can live, or to go into the dark. We must either love each other, or we must die.

The Rev. Andrea Cano is interim president of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon. Ordained with the United Church of Christ, she is also a board-certified clinical chaplain.
Freedom and responsibility. These two concepts were the core of what Benjamin Franklin believed would be needed for a successful democratic experiment. At the time of the writing of the Constitution, religion was an assumed presence in the American colonies. Franklin believed that for the democratic experiment to be successful, government would need to protect the individual rights of citizens and religion would need to promote the common good. It is this balance and maintenance of this awkward tension that would ensure a healthy democracy in Franklin’s view.

Many people today decry the loss of influence of the Christian Church and of the broader religious voice in our politics and our cultural norms. They point to the me-centered individualism of our society and the loss of morals that serve as the social glue that keeps us working together.

Those who decry the waning influence of the religious voice in our society are right to be concerned. But I also believe that their concern is misplaced. The problem is not the loss of religious institutions themselves but the loss of an inherently American belief that with freedom comes responsibility. At one time, the community largely looked to the religious sector to maintain its commitment to the common good.

The answer to today’s dilemma is not the simple return to a time when our religious leaders held the fabric of society together from their pulpits. Because, today, even many of our pulpits contribute to the me-centered individualism of our society, as religion is promoted as a means only for personal salvation and individual prosperity. This is not the religion that Franklin imagined when he was crafting the assumptions of the democratic experiment. His was a religion of the common good.

I think that Benjamin Franklin got it right for his time regarding the democratic experiment. We need government to protect individual rights and religion to promote the common good.

Without that, I believe Franklin is right. Democracy cannot survive unless we all agree that with freedom comes responsibility.

Get that message in your church, mosque or synagogue. Or get it somewhere else if religion is not your thing. The point is, just get it. Democracy depends on it.

The Rev. Brian Heron is presbyter for Vision and Mission of the Presbytery of the Cascades, a geographic region that includes 96 churches in western Oregon, southern Washington and the border of California.
In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022, feminist activists in Russia organized the Feminist Anti-War Resistance—a decentralized grassroots movement. Participants choose their own protest strategies, posting information via Telegram Messenger. In the first month, the Feminist Anti-War Resistance Telegram channel gained more than 25,000 followers.

Protest in Russia is often covert. Protesters write anti-war slogans on paper money, post stickers on bus stops, decorate clothing with pacifist and Ukrainian national symbols, and post fliers that resemble missing persons posters.

Why does this protest have to be clandestine? Since the beginning of the war, Russian legislation has created new measures to fight "disinformation" about the actions of the Russian army. According to the new Russian regulations, Russian aggression cannot be called "war on Ukraine" but rather a "special military operation." Any attempt to stand against war actions has become criminalized: a perpetrator may be jailed up to 15 years for online or offline anti-war activities.

In-person protests in Russia earlier this year resulted in thousands of arrests. Russian independent media followed the protests, highlighting the large number of young women taking part in rallies and marches and being arrested. On March 8 (International Women’s Day), Russian supporters of the Feminist Anti-War Resistance protested in 94 cities. They wore black as a sign of mourning, handed out flowers, organized public performances on the streets and read poetry.

Outside of Russia, the movement has spread to dozens of countries around the globe, including the United States. Immigrant and non-immigrant supporters of the Feminist Anti-War Resistance have organized their own protests or joined existing protests in support of Ukraine in New York, Michigan, North Carolina, California and Oregon. Protests outside Russia tend to be larger because they don’t pose risks to demonstrators.

In Russia—following toughening legislation, closure of independent media and open threats—many activists, feminists included, fled the country in March and April to join anti-war efforts abroad, particularly in Georgia, Armenia and Turkey.

The Feminist Anti-War Resistance remains one of the few organized anti-war movements in Russia, with members continuing to protest even after arrests and trials. The Resistance is openly supported by prominent professionals, politicians and women’s rights activists around the world—among them Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Zillah R. Eisenstein and Nancy Fraser in the United States.

To view the manifesto and join the movement, go to feministsagainstwar.org.

There is no legal violation for writing on banknotes in Russia, making hand-written anti-war slogans like нет войны (“No War”) on rubles a safe way for citizens to protest the war in Ukraine.
Why do you believe in God? I believe in God because I have experienced the Divine in so many and varied ways in life. Others might be able to point to science, coincidence or some other explanation for what I experience, but those answers never seem to be enough for me.

I sense in relationships, in creation, in events, in crowds, and in solitude and contemplation something that is other, holy, MORE. I name this God.

What makes you sad about the state of religion in the United States right now? Religion is being used as a weapon. It is being used to justify petty differences and hate. It is being manipulated to support things that it never should support.

No matter our differences, we should work for a society where every person can live up to their fullest potential, and right now religion is being used for just the opposite.

Why do you think it’s important for people of faith to be involved in justice work? Because it’s what Jesus did as a penultimate revelation of God. It is what characterizes the God I believe in and the God described in the Bible. It is what I am called to as a partner of God and Christ in this work of transforming lives and the world.

Justice brings about equity and peace. As Paul wrote: We are one body; if one part suffers, we all suffer. So too in our society and world, if some suffer and we do nothing to address the suffering and what causes it, we will suffer too.

This is clear, look at climate change and racism and economic disparity to name just a few—we all suffer because we are not working for justice for all.
TOGETHER AGAIN

A FUNDRAISING GALA FOR EMO

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 20

Abernethy Center  |  606 15th St., Oregon City
Reception at 6 p.m. | Dinner Buffet at 7 p.m.
$50 per person    |  Sponsor a table for $1,000

emoregon.org/gala

Join us for a special evening of stories, music and friends highlighting the work of EMO. This outside event (under a tent) is the first of its kind since 2019. You won’t want to miss the opportunity to be TOGETHER AGAIN.