

# Unitarian incident shouldn't define city

It is a beautiful chapel, elegant in its roughhewn simplicity; hospitable in the deepness of its wood textures and the friendliness of the small congregation. Windows line the chapel's walls. South Georgia trees and brush are visible through the glass, making the surrounding grove and forest an integral part of the sanctuary.

The small congregation was proud of this integration of nature and architecture. They were pleased that they had built a church set in the woods just east of the Valdosta city line. Members participated deeply in the church's design and construction. They offered a nursery for a visitor's small child. Members sat listening intently in the horseshoe of wooden pews that lined the sanctuary. They pointed to the kitchen where they chatted and visited after their church services. They presented coffee and a glass of water to a visitor, something the visitor noticed because so many accepted invitations rarely include the offer of something as simple as a drink of water.

Just a few weeks ago, I was that visitor at the local Unitarian Universalist Church. I had been invited to read a few of my newspaper columns as part of the church service. It was a beautiful Sunday morning set in a South Georgia spring, warm and sunny. Parking in the church's lot, shade from large overhead trees soothed the morning heat. A greeting at the door eclipsed the warmth of the day. It was a fine morning, a friendly congregation, a beautiful building.

Last week, a bit of that memory was marred. If you've been reading the paper during the past few days, you already know that the Unitarian Universalist Church was vandalized. Window glass shattered. Shelves overturned. Restrooms and the kitchen wrecked. The chapel ransacked. Walls spattered with spray-painted obscenities, threats and odd repetitions of the number "6." The walls of the nursery were sprayed with even more obscenities.

At this writing, it is unknown who committed these acts or why. The little church in the woods only left the silent trees as known witnesses. The vandalism could be a hate crime, a prank gone too far, or some personal motivation may have spurred this act of violent nonsense. What is known is that church members found their chapel nearly in ruins. The incident has shaken the small congregation, but many say it has not shattered them.

This past weekend, they met at the church as they meet each Sunday morning. At 3 p.m. this coming Sunday; the church hosts a community-wide Unified Service Against Hate. "This public event is an opportunity for the community to become involved in proclaiming that Valdostans speak out against hate," according to an announcement from the church. It is a chance for local individuals and other churches to say that what happened to the Unitarian Universalist Church is unacceptable behavior in Valdosta, and it won't and shouldn't be condoned.

It is an opportunity for Unitarians to demonstrate that they will tolerate neither random nor planned attacks upon their building or congregation. With this exception, the Unitarian Universalist Church is an extremely tolerant congregation - tolerant of each other's religious beliefs and ideas, tolerant of people who either do or don't believe in God. The idea is members don't have to agree with each other, but they do accept one another's beliefs.

Whether or not you agree with the Unitarian philosophy; it should be agreed that the incident at the Unitarian Universalist Church is unacceptable. In a nation that prides itself on freedom of religion, and in a region that is known as the Bible belt, the criminal demolition of any church should be regarded as an affront to all faiths. It is a black eye on the face of Valdosta, but the Unitarian Universalist incident does not have to be scar upon the city's soul.

Reaching out to one another in times of need, whether by voice, physical presence, helping hands or deep pockets, is the benchmark of a great community.

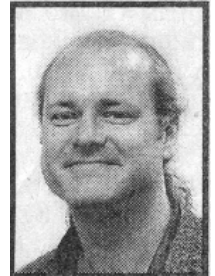
The local Unitarian Universalist congregation is small. Its coffers are not heavily funded, according to the church. But from what I witnessed during my recent visit, the Unitarian members are great in faith and wealthy in spirit. They will likely persevere and survive this incident.

Valdostans should not think this incident defines the city; however, the community's response to this church in need will reflect the condition of Valdosta's soul.

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**Ramblin'**



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