

"Staking a Claim for Unitarian Universalism"®

Mattatuck Unitarian Universalist Society

The Rev. Jeanne Lloyd

October 12, 2008

CALL TO GATHER:

"Come, Come Whoever You Are" # 188

Come, come, whoever you are;
Man, woman, parent, child
Whatever your religious journey,
Whatever your skin color,
Whatever your physical abilities,
Whomever you love-
You are welcome here this morning.
You are welcome at our table.
You are welcome in this religious home.

CHALICE LIGHTING (Rev. Lloyd & Tracy Johnson, President)

We gather this hour as people of faith,
With joys and sorrows, gifts and needs.
We light this beacon of hope,
Sign of our quest for truth and meaning,
In celebration of the life we share together.

OUR SHARED MINISTRY COVENANT

President:

May all who are members rise in body or spirit, and enter into this covenant together with our new consulting minister:

Congregation:

Rev. Jeanne, we welcome you as our partner in ministry, at the threshold of our journey together.

Minister:

I welcome you as my partner in ministry, at the threshold of our journey together.

Congregation:

We will use our hands and hearts, our vision and voices, to heal and not to harm this beloved community.

Minister:

I will use my hands and heart, my vision and voice, to heal and not to harm this beloved community.

Congregation:

We will dare to disagree agreeably with you, speaking the truth with love, dreaming of what we may become, and to freely venture the untried. This is our time together.

Minister:

I will dare to disagree agreeably with you, speaking the truth with love, dreaming with you of what you may become, freely venturing the untried. This is our time together.

Congregation:

We will share our portions of truth with you, listen deeply and learn from one another, so that we may grow in wisdom and vision and understanding.

Minister:

I will share my portions of truth with you, and listen deeply and learn from one another, so that we may grow in wisdom and vision and understanding.

President: In this, our precious time together ---

ALL: *May we be a blessing to each other; and together, be a blessing to the world.*

*** HYMN #289 "Creative Love, Our Thanks We Give"**

COVENANT (in unison)

*Love is the spirit of this society.
Dwelling together in peace,
Seeking truth,
Helping one another,
Serving human needs,
Honoring the Earth and all that is,
This is our covenant.*

OFFERTORY

This is the time that we ask for your
contributions to this church community.
In addition, today we offer you the opportunity to
make an additional contribution for our association,
the Unitarian Universalist Association.
Envelopes were placed on the chairs prior to the service.
Please include them in your offering,
as you wish.
Funds included in this special UUA envelope
will go to support the theological education
of both lay members and ministers.

May our donations sustain
and strengthen this place
which is sacred to so many of us,
this community of memory and hope,
for we are now the keepers of the dream.
(Brandoch L. Lovely)

STORY FOR ALL AGES

SINGING THE CHILDREN ON THEIR WAY

*As you go may joy surround you, as you go, go in peace;
know our love is with you always, as you go, as you go.*

SHARING JOYS AND CONCERNS**

If you woke this morning with a sorrow so heavy

that you need the help of this community to carry it;
or if, in the spirit of thanksgiving,
you woke with gratitude in your heart
that simply must be shared,
now is the time for you to speak.

For, it is in sharing our personal highs and lows
that we enlarge our circle of love,
and strengthen our caring for one another.
May all that is said at this time be seen as holy.

PRAYER AND MEDITATION

These words from Rev. Theresa Novak:

Come into this place¹
There are healing waters here
And hands with soothing balm
To ease your troubled days.
Bring your wounds and aching hearts
Your scars too numb to feel.
Your questions and complaints,
All are welcome here.

Insert concerns & joys

Rest awhile.
Let the warmth of this community
Surround you,
Hold you,
Heal you.
When you feel stronger,
Just a bit,
Notice those that need you too.

¹ Rev. Theresa Novak.

They are here.
They are everywhere.

Weep with them
Smile with them,
Work with them,
Laugh along the way.

Pass the cup,
Drink the holy fire.

Take it with you
Into the world.

We are saved
And we save each other
Again, again, and yet again.

In Silence

In Song— Spirit of Life, #123

SERMON

"Staking a Claim for Unitarian Universalism"

~ The Rev. Jeanne Lloyd

For a very long time now,
I have subscribed to the "star" philosophy of human relationship.
What that means, is that I try to see each person as a star,
with points that show off their gifts,
and inside edges that are their growing edges.
I try to apply that philosophy to myself as well.

In theory, if we were ever to become "perfect,"
we would become a circle.

And, in that case,
our growing would be done.

Would you want your growing to be done?

Not me.

I think I'd rather be a star,
for the rest of my life,
than to achieve ultimate perfection.

So, too, it is with congregations.

This is a family size congregation.

Family size congregations have their own ways of governing themselves,
and own ways of being with each other
and the world.

The next size larger congregation,
is called a pastoral-size congregation.

A pastoral-size congregation has a somewhat different way of governing itself,
and different ways of being with each other and the world.

After that comes the program size congregation,
where another and more complex form of governance occurs,
and new ways of connecting to the church happens.

There's another level after that,
But let's not worry about it for now.

My point is that most often,
we choose to do what is comfortable.
Even though we may want growth for ourselves as individuals
or the church,
we can be tempted to continue to be the way
we always have been,
because that is what we know,
that's what is easy.
We don't know what we don't know.

But, to grow,
whether you are an individual person
or a congregation,
we must learn new ways of being together,
and
new ways of governing ourselves.
In short,
we must risk change.

Now some may wonder
whether there is a place for liberal religion
in Woodbury,
and the wider area.

Let me say clearly,
that more now than ever,
there is.

However,
we must grow into a new way of being
if Unitarian Universalism is going to thrive
in this area.

Let me share with you what is happening to mainline churches.
Much of this information comes from several sources,

including a book called, "Transforming Congregational Culture,"
by Anthony B. Robinson.

For over 300 years,
this country was rooted deeply in an era of American Christendom
where Protestant mainline churches
reflected the broad stroke norms of this society.
Simply remember the blue laws that existed in the 50s,
where stores were closed,
so that people could go to church
and be with family?
That era is gone.²

Other changes have occurred in society as well.

In the 1960s,
people stopped going to or belonging to a church because it was expected
or because they felt an obligation to do so.
Instead, the next generation was one of seekers,
where *motivation* replaced obligation.

Another factor that led to a shifting in religious practice
in the last ½ of the 20th century,
is the erosion of trust and reliable authority.

I quote,
"The 1960s and 70s saw a succession of events
that tore holes in the American society and its religions.
There were a series of traumatic assassinations;
an unpopular war;
[a new drug culture;
and political scandal which brought down a president].
Social trust and confidence were shattered . . .
and authority in many forms was,

² Robinson, Anthony B. Transforming Congregational Culture. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan (2003) 3.

if not ridiculed and rejected outright,
then simply dismissed . . .
Once reliable authority figures
-- from presidents to pastors --
seemed to be missing in action . . .
In the meantime,
traditional understandings of family changed,
divorce rates [rose],
and children were left floating
in a world of affluence and [purposelessness] . . .
Increasingly, people came to church,
if they did so at all,
seeking something like healing, salvation, and hope
for themselves and their families.³

"The generation that was still in charge
in the mainline churches
partly because the baby-boomers had exited those churches in vast numbers –
was the pre-World War II generation,
the generation of modernity.
For that generation there was still a binding story –
that is, [an American religion]
. . . [where] . . . there was still a sense of norms that applied across the board.
These assumptions of modernity,
which included a trust in reason, progress, technology, and tolerance . . .
lost traction in the emerging postmodern society.
The postmodern generation notably lacked confidence in the American story
and in religion.
Theirs was a more fragmented, decentered world of rapid shifts,
disposable identities,
and changing images
the world,
as some have said,
of MTV."⁴

³ Robinson, Anthony B. *Transforming Congregational Culture*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan (2003), 5-6.

Along the way,
our country also found a new religious pluralism.

Again, I quote,
"as a consequence of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965."⁵
"In a compressed time,
the American population has gone from predominantly European-American
to being much more racially and ethnically diverse.
During that same period,
the country has gone from a religiously homogeneous Christian culture
to a religiously pluralistic society . . .
"The fact that one's neighbors now are Muslims, Buddhists, or Hindus
inevitably raised questions for American Christians:
Those questions were, "What do we believe?
How are we to express our faith?"
And, as a consequence of their attempt to demonstrate tolerance,
their Christian theology became very thin.]
"Open" Christians were so open that they didn't have much to say!"⁶
What was becoming increasingly obvious
was that Calvin was losing his grip on Christianity.
Buddhists and Muslims
not to mention [Humanists] –
could be decent,
caring people
and good citizens [without need for a Mainline church].
[Liberal] congregations and their leaders
were often unable or unwilling to maintain
any real element of Christian distinctiveness . . .
[they] sounded pretty much like the dominant culture,
where a commitment to reason, individual autonomy, progress, and optimism

⁴ Robinson, Anthony B. *Transforming Congregational Culture*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan (2003), 8.

⁵ Robinson, Anthony B. *Transforming Congregational Culture*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan (2003), 6.

⁶ Robinson, Anthony B. *Transforming Congregational Culture*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan (2003), 7.

held sway.⁷

"[The last] factor in the changing religious practice of North American society
that is named by Robinson,
was something that always bedevils established groups
complacency.

Too often mainline congregations and leaders
assumed that they had a guaranteed place and constituency.

And why not?

After all, they/we often stood on the main streets,
at the center of downtowns,
and on the town greens of America.

As obligation was replaced by motivation,
as social trust and reliable authority broke down,
as a new wave of immigration brought religious diversity,
the Protestant mainline church
was slow to recognize its own jeopardy.⁸

Mainline denominations 'were well suited to carry on an existing, established
church; they were not ready or able to lead,
or in many cases,
even to perceive change.

In summary, "these five [factors],
[the psychological shift] from obligation to motivation,
the breakdown of social trust and reliable authority,
new immigration and religious pluralism,
[the liberal Christian embrace
of modern principles of reason, optimism, and progress
that undermined traditional Christian theology] . . .
and simple complacency . . .
have spelled decline
for the mainline Protestant churches.

⁷ Robinson, Anthony B. *Transforming Congregational Culture*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan (2003), 9.

⁸ Robinson, Anthony B. *Transforming Congregational Culture*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan (2003), 10.

So what does all this have to do with Unitarian Universalism
and our place in the world?

A lot.

I ask you, "How have we most often defined ourselves?"
"How did this congregation come to be formed in 1980?"

Like it or not,
our identity has been hooked to mainline Protestantism
for several hundred years.
Most often we have separated ourselves from other churches,
for what we were not.
In the beginning, we said,
"We are not 'that kind' (meaning Calvinistic) of Christian."
Later, we would say,
somewhat defensively,
we are not Christian at all.
With a new generation of seekers,
some do not choose to abandon Christianity,
but to embrace the philosophy and teachings of Jesus,
and our Jewish roots,
while also learning from other faith traditions that ground us,
spiritually & intellectually.

Now,
even though you may not identify Unitarian Universalism
as a mainline Protestant church,
what do you think happens to a denomination that links its identity,
even if in opposition,
to mainline religions that are declining?

Friends, we can no longer afford to define ourselves as,
"We are not that kind of church."
And, here is where I believe Unitarian Universalism

has a unique opportunity
and niche to fill,
to meet the needs of the next generation of seekers.
What we must do,
is define and live out Unitarian Universalist values
that say who we are.
If people are not attending the mainline churches,
it is an irrelevant response and identity,
for us to say,
"We are not that kind of church."
What will only matter,
is for us to say and live into the kind of church
we want to be.
To do that we must understand who we have been,
and who we hope to become.
That requires that we understand what our purpose is,
here in the greater Woodbury area.

What is our purpose, in the 21st century?

In a busy,
digitized,
fractionized,
multi-tasking,
computer driven,
"drive-through for breakfast, lunch and dinner,"
"change the remote 100 times an hour"
world,
people are starving for connection,
for relationships they can trust,
for spiritual growth and deepening,
and for a place that can provide
that same kind of grounding and wisdom
for their children.

Those Unitarian Universalist congregations

that find a way to build on the best of who they have been
and learn to address the needs of people
looking for a place where they and their families
can grow spiritually . . .
those are the ones that are growing.
Those are the ones that survive.

Let's look again
at what those five primary factors are
that have led to the decline of mainline Protestant churches:

Factor 1: A shift from obligation to motivation.
Shall we grow into a congregation
that consistently meets the spiritual needs of its guests and members?
If we can do that on the front end,
then our new members
will contribute their time, treasure and talent,
to make sure it continues.

Factor 2: The breakdown of social trust and reliable authority.
Shall we create and live in right relationship with each other,
or said another way,
live out our 300 year heritage of establishing a covenantal theology
with one another?
Is this congregation a place where trust and respect is deepened,
even in disagreement?

Factor 3: New immigration and religious pluralism.
We already have a head start on this,
we are the liberal congregation that respects other faith traditions.
We know that we must help grow an anti-racist society.
Only radically liberal and conservative churches are growing at this point.
For people who do not already have a congregation,
ours can be the congregation that becomes
the "mainline" religion
supporting equal rights for all people

and respect for different faith traditions.
We can be the beacon of hope & transformation.
We can have a corner on the market!

Factor 4: [the liberal Christian embrace
of the modern principles of reason, optimism, and progress
undermined a Calvinistic theology].

But, for us, that's OK!
That's what we've been saying for several hundred years!
Again,
we already have a head start on this - - -
the modern principles of reason, optimism and progress
are at the very foundation of our faith
and we know that instead of undercutting our faith,
they both ground
and enhance our covenantal theology.

Factor 5: Simple complacency . . .
well we are not so big –
so perhaps we are not complacent or overconfident.
But, then again,
are we up to the task?

PAUSE

Do you know why people come to church?

There are three main reasons:

(1) Someone has invited them to come.

On average, Unitarian Universalists invite someone
to come to church once in every 27 years.

Are we keeping our light to ourselves?

- (2) They come because they want their children to be grounded
in spiritual/ethical principles
that will help them thrive
in a confusing world, or,
(3) They may come because they are in crisis,

and their world view
is not working any more.

In short, they come out of,
or because of,
an unstated need for relationship,
stability,
and community.

And, for all these reasons,
my friends,
I am happy to say,
Unitarian Universalism is growing.⁹

It has grown in its membership every year for the last two decades;
42% of UU congregations grew by 10% or more between 1995 and 2000
Whereas, Presbyterians have declined of 50%, Methodists have declined by 52%,
Congregationalists have declined by 60%
But, our conservative Evangelical friends, have *grown* by 50%
Growth is possible,
as an entire generation of baby-boomers
retire in good health and with a desire
to find meaning and purpose in their lives.
Growth is possible,
as a new generation of youth,
concerned with building community and saving our planet,
look for a place to spiritually sustain their quest.

The Rev. Bill Sinkford,
President of the UUA,
asked at the 2007 General Assembly in Portland, Oregon,

"Why grow?
He says,
"It's not about us.

⁹ <http://www.mbdoua.org/uploads/GA2007%20Why%20Liberal%20Churches.pdf>

It's about them,
[the people we were before we found this faith.]
The people who need Unitarian Universalism
and who need our congregation
more than it may seem that we need them.
He says, "It's not about more dollars,
more committee members,
and finding someone to make the coffee.
It's about the spirit life of the individual
who is searching for us,]"
and doesn't even know we are here.
It's about how we,
as Unitarian Universalist congregations,
shine our light in the world.

So my friends,
shall we stake a claim for Unitarian Universalism in Woodbury?

If yes, can I please hear loud and clear,
Yes, we will!

May it be so.

Amen.

REFLECTION AND RESPONSE (congregation)

*** HYMN #300 "With Heart and Mind"**

CLOSING WORDS

EXTINGUISHING OF THE CHALICE

Please join hands for the extinguishing of the chalice.

We extinguish this flame, but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again. Let the congregation say: AMEN!

Music: Marj Hanson

Religious Education: Denise Pedane

Minister: The Rev. Jeanne Lloyd, M.Div., M.A.

* You are invited to rise in body or spirit.