

Living Our Mission

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Last Sunday, after the Stone Soup luncheon, Carl and I decided to go for a drive. It was such an amazing fall afternoon – sunny and bright, crisp and warm all at the same time. Don McFadyen told Carl that we might see wonderful fall colors by heading up the Guelph Line. Wonderful! Somewhere we haven't been before! And so, after a quick consultation of our map to find out how to get to this magical Guelph Line, we headed out of town.

Occasionally, Carl and I like to go on what we call an “adventure.” We don't necessarily know where we're going, how we'll get there, what we'll do, or how we'll know when we've arrived, but we know we'll enjoy whatever happens, so off we go. Our adventure last week included not only beautiful scenery, but a slice of fruit pie at a pumpkin farm, a walk in the Arboretum at the University of Guelph, and dinner at an Irish pub. Overall, quite a satisfying journey!

Not so long ago, in July to be exact, we embarked on another type of journey. For that trip, we knew exactly where we were going – we were coming to Hamilton. Our preparation for that “adventure” was quite different than for our afternoon jaunt. We got maps and tour books. We charted our course and made reservations. The car got serviced and we carefully packed what we'd need along the way. We made sure we had all of the necessary paperwork and identification to get us across the border into Canada. We knew where we were going, when, and what it would take us to get there.

Both of these kinds of journeys have their place and their purpose. Last Sunday, we went without a specific destination in mind, allowing ourselves to be present in the moment and enjoying whatever presented itself to us next. There are times in congregational life when we need to be open to what presents itself in the moment. We need to spend time with each other without an agenda. We need to share experiences that fill us with wonder, beauty, rest, and fulfillment. In each other's company, these times of engagement and joy help strengthen our bonds and build our relationships with one another.

Now, we could have approached our July move with the same laissez-faire attitude we had about our Sunday drive; but we might have ended up in Saskatoon! Not that it isn't nice in Saskatoon, I'm sure, but it wasn't where we wanted to be! So, in contrast, for that trip, Carl and I were on a mission – we had a very specific outcome in mind for our journey. We wanted to be sure that our efforts would land us in Hamilton, on a specific day, with all we would need to accomplish our start our new life here with you.

Congregations, too, need to plan their journey together with a sense of mission and focus. Having a direction in the life of our church, having a sense of mission, serves us well. Congregations need to have goals, outcomes, and projects as a part of community life, just as we need time to nurture our internal relationships. It is good for us, as a community, to have purpose and a sense of meaning from our being together. As Unitarians, our shared Principles and values give us a framework for directing our energy toward worthy causes and fruitful uses of our time, treasure, and talent.

Author Bryant H. McGill tells us that “having a sense of purpose is having a sense of self. A course to plot is a destination to hope for.” Having a destination in mind allows us to focus, making us less likely to be distracted or detoured by life’s many possibilities and options. With a sense of mission, we gain a sense of control – we determine our path and progress, not someone else.

Many churches are struggling to survive as they face life’s myriad challenges and complexities. With change swirling around us in so many arenas – in culture, technology, the economy, and so forth – it can be so easy to get distracted, disturbed, or distressed. Without a strong sense of mission – the compass that helps us keep ourselves on course – it can be easy to get lost and founder in times like these.

Our denominational experts on mission at the Unitarian Universalist Association tell us that, “Studies have shown that the congregations (with) living vision, mission, and covenant statements are the ones that are growing—not only in numbers but also in the depth of membership commitment. This growth shows in the depth of commitment members have to the world around them and to living more fulfilled lives.”

Author Peter Steinke, of the Alban Institute, says, “A congregation is a group of people who believe that more can be accomplished to achieve a purpose by joining with others.” I think we, this church, all of us together as a congregation, would like to not only to survive, but to thrive. I believe we would like to be a beacon of hope and welcome to those in our community who are looking for the “good news” of Unitarianism; who would like to feel that their lives have been saved by joining us in faith.

I don’t know that Unitarianism is the religion for everyone, but I do know that I’m committed to making sure that anyone who needs us isn’t kept from the blessing of being a part of our saving faith simply because they didn’t know we were here. We have a purpose for being with one another, and we have a mission to make our faith available and accessible for all who need and want to join us. We need to continuously review who we are and who we are trying to be.

This congregation draws from a long, rich history going back to 1889. This church has had a mission to accomplish in each of its iterations. However, the joy and the risk of our liberal religious faith is that “each new generation must discover its own understanding of vision, mission, and covenant. Here is a quote from the UUA website on mission: “(There is) some truth to the remark that “liberal religion is always only one generation removed from extinction,” because without the valuable work in discovering and creating vision, mission, and covenant, the reasons why our congregations gather can be lost. Because we choose to allow (and to insist upon) individual determination of belief, we cannot fall back onto historical statements as the reasons why we exist. Rather, the members of each gathered community must determine for themselves the reasons why they continue to exist.”

(From: UUA Website/Mission)

Having a mission statement that everyone endorses is only the first step, however. I don’t know how many times in my work as an organization development consultant, I would work with a team to develop a mission or strategic plan, and then find out six months or a year later that it had been neatly placed in a binder, never to be consulted again. Vision and mission statements need to be living documents. They need to be alive

within the congregation, a point of constant reference and engaged commitment. Living our mission on a daily basis is a part of the spiritual practice of this congregation.

“When a congregation’s leadership follows through with the mission to create objectives, ties all major decisions back to these statements, and makes sure the statements are effectively used in worship, the commitment of the members is strengthened. Congregations with vital, living visions and missions are growing, whereas those without them have little substance to attract new people to their midst.”

(From: UUA website/Mission)

Yesterday, lay leaders of this congregation and I participated in a day-long workshop with Art Brewer, a lay facilitator who works with the Canadian Unitarian Council to help congregations define their mission and build strong foundations for working together effectively. I want to honor the time, commitment, and focus that created a successful outcome to yesterday’s meeting. In that group, we created a timeline of this congregation, and talked about what the lessons of history can tell us about who we are today. Together, we looked forward into the near future and started to frame a set of priorities for our work together. And, we began to talk about what this church’s mission should be now.

It’s a way to start creating a road map for reaching the milestones that are important to us in this church, in this generation; a way to think about our purposes as a congregation and how we want to show up for each other and for the larger community. We now will need to create a process to revisit our mission that allows everyone in this congregation to have the opportunity to participate in the weeks and months ahead. Every voice needs to be heard.

Here’s a little history to help you get started thinking about this important process in our congregation:

In 1995, _____ took the input of those involved in First Church and crafted a beautiful statement of Mission and Covenant. Let me read it to you:

We covenant to build a spiritual home, a house of many rooms.

Its foundation is the earth; its timbers are the Unitarian Universalist

Principles of belief and behavior; its roof is our commitment to one another; its windows are open to the light of truth and the fresh air of tolerance and respect.

Dwellers here find knowledge, strength and hope.

Nurtured in our home, we are inspired to carry out our mission, reaching out to the wider community.

We light candles of welcome, caring, and commitment.

Their warmth and light stream into the night.

Strangers become friends; travelers find rest.

The doors of this home swing open to the lightest touch.

That is a beautiful vision. A vision is a picture of the congregation’s hoped-for future. It is not the current reality of the congregation, but it is a dream of what the congregation wants to make of itself, its aspirations, a statement of us as our best selves in service to our faith. As a covenant, it articulates what it is we hold dear in our faith community.

From our dreams, our vision, we also create a sense of mission – who we are, what we value, and why we exist. The mission is a carefully defined, concise, and focused statement of what the congregation wants to mean to the community, for what it

wishes to be known, and the measuring stick for all our congregation does. A mission puts faith into action – we have to DO something.

Here is more from the UUA website on congregational mission: “Every congregation has a mission—a way it lives out its life. Healthy congregations consciously articulate their mission, and this mission paints a path of how to move from the present reality to the dreamed-of vision. The mission must be the guide for congregational life. The mission should relate a congregation to the community context by establishing the congregation’s sense of religious identity, relating this identity to the needs of those the congregation aims to serve. The mission should answer the question of who is to be served, what service is for those inside the congregation, and what service is offered to those in the wider community.”

Our shared values and our Seven Principles create the foundation on which our mission is built. We value each other, not only in our church, but in the larger world. We want to see a better world emerge, one where justice, equity, and peace triumph over all.

Many people are first attracted to Unitarian Universalism because of our faith tradition’s strong stance on the side of social justice and the active part that our congregations and members take in a variety of ways to make the world a better place. Whatever else our mission entails; Unitarians consistently show our ongoing support for social action by having it as one of the important ministries of our churches. We believe that deeds define our faith, not creeds. Our mission is a call to action.

In yesterday’s session, we crafted several goal statements. I want to share three of those with you this morning. While these statements, in and of themselves, don’t define our mission, they do give us some clues about what we might include in a mission for First Church. Here are the three goal statements that the group prioritized for action this year:

“We need to develop a church-wide vision and mission that is communicated to and endorsed by all the members of the church.”

“We need to continue our commitment to open, shared, transparent, and clear communication and develop our skills to deal with conflict and other congregational issues. We need to make sure that the entire congregation shares these skill sets.”

“We need to live what we are and use the tools we’ve developed to build a truly welcoming and socially responsible church, actively engaged in the community.”

Food for thought and grist for action.

Hope is one of our most significant human capacities. It gives us vision to see the possible future and the energy to get started toward our destination. Gandhi said, “A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history.” Imagine this congregation, our determined spirits fired by unquenchable faith, on a mission to serve each other and the larger community. How might we alter the course of history – for each other? For our faith? For our brothers and sisters in Hamilton?

Author Viktor Frankl wrote: “Everyone has his or her own specific vocation or mission in life; everyone must carry out a concrete assignment that demands fulfillment. Therein she or he cannot be replaced, nor can his or her life be repeated. Thus, everyone's task is unique as his or her specific opportunity to implement it.”

We have a vision of who we would like to be as a faith community. I think the First Unitarian Church of Hamilton – we as a congregation - have a unique, vital, and specific mission that we are called to fulfill. I believe we can find a way to work together to articulate it, agree on it, be it, cherish it, and share it with others. I know our love will guide us and hope will sustain us. I look forward to sharing this journey and living our faith together.

May it be so.