

The Church of the Future

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Traditional planning methods work as follows. You describe the current state of things. Envision a preferred future. Determine the size of the gap between the current state and the desired future state. Create an action plan to close the gap. It's a linear approach to the management of time and resources. Start at point A and move to point B.

Learning in a liminal season isn't linear. It is cyclical. We revisit the same themes and challenges over and over, each time from a slightly different vantage point. We learn things. We unlearn things. We relearn what we thought we had already mastered.

You shouldn't be designing a linear plan to guide a cyclical learning process.

☐ Susan Beaumont

I want to thank your congregation's board, staff, and your Senior Minister, my dear colleague Rev. Kathleen, for inviting me to be here with you all this morning. When I transferred from the Central East and New England Regional staffs of our Unitarian Universalist Association to serve as the Regional Lead for this, the MidAmerica Region, I had the goal that I would get out to visit with all of the congregations that first Spring. Spring of 2020. Great plan... I had planned with Reverends Rob and Janne Eller-Isaacs to come and visit in May of 2020, and that was not able to happen. Because the Universe happened to us.

And we, we as a faith tradition, and indeed as humanity, have had to adapt, change, and learn new ways of being, not just of being church, but of being human. Amidst fear, loss, grief, scarcity... buying toilet paper by the case off the internet appears to be a permanent thing for me now... We have changed. We are different. I know I am different in ways that I could not have predicted, and in ways that I still do not fully understand. And at one level, that is annoyingly human. We are always changing, but most times the changes are so slow that we do not even realize them as they are happening.

I have found that after these last three years I am far more introverted than I could ever have imagined being... and for someone whose ministry is coaching, companioning, challenging, and connecting congregations, no longer being an extrovert has been a profound shift for me. Whereas before I used to love getting out and visiting all of the over 1000 congregations that I and the rest of the UUA Congregational Life Staff serve, over two years of staying in my home in Oak Grove Kentucky have made getting out among the congregations and learning from them much harder for me...

Except for coming to the Twin Cities. Coming to the Twin Cities is nothing but a joy. And while I said that to get a smile or two, I do mean it. Interim Ministry should be a time of introspection for a congregation, and anytime a congregation has had a search process not result in a settled ministry, there is more introspection to do. I have seen your congregation and your senior staff leadership doing that reflective work over the past six months, and my sense is that your congregation is asking the right questions and listening to the answers.

I wish more congregations were engaging this time of transformation and hopefully coming out of this global pandemic with the kind of reflection, wonder, and questioning I have found at Unity Church these last few months.

One of the joys of my ministry these last 16 years, besides serving congregations in Illinois, Michigan, and Southern California, and serving these last 8 years as a Congregational Consultant on the staff of the Unitarian Universalist Association, has been that I have also served as a Reserve US Army Chaplain. And though I love the direct ministry with soldiers, I think what has been the most transformative for me has been being in authentic shared ministry relationships with chaplains of other faith traditions. As I was thinking about how I wanted to share with you all some wonderings about how our communities and churches are transforming, an experience with one of my military chaplain colleagues came to mind. You see, they will often share with me their understanding of who we are as Unitarian Universalists... often in comparison to their own faith.

A few years ago a Lutheran colleague told me that what she admired about Unitarian Universalism was that our faith tradition changes and grows as society and culture changes... where as she felt that her faith tradition, and indeed her little country church had the overall mission to never change at all no matter what society and culture did. And to stop society and culture from changing however they could.

Think about that. The idea that one of the central practices of Unitarian Universalism is to be a faith, a living tradition that intentionally seeks to transform the human relationship to each other and to the sacred in response to the changes in human society and culture, in comparison to the many faith traditions that seek to either never change within the walls of the church... or to seek to slow down or stop the changes in society and culture. That was how my military chaplain colleague saw us, and wished her own little Lutheran church could be more like us.

I did not have the heart to tell her how often we Unitarian Universalists struggle with change too. Because gosh I wish we could always be the church, the living faith tradition she thinks we are... to be a faith tradition that is constantly and intentionally adapting to the changing nature of humanity and our relationship to each other and the world that holds us. A faith that is building and rebuilding the kind of community that people need to make sense of and live within this rapidly changing reality.

Sometimes we are that church. Because we do transform as a faith tradition. Another military chaplain colleague once said to me that he watches what is happening in Unitarian Universalism, because he knows that whatever we are struggling with, his tradition will be struggling with in 10-15 years.

To wonder at what the Unitarian Universalist church of the future might be, I think there are two foundations we have to set first. The first is that change rarely happens because we want it to... change happens because we have to transform to survive and have any chance at thriving, as individual human beings and as the communities we create. And secondly, we Unitarian Universalists are comparatively really, really good at

religious transformation... I mean really good. Religious transformation is kind of our special skill.

To wonder at who we are becoming as a faith tradition we must first look at the ways that society and culture have changed and are changing. Unitarian Universalism is wrestling right now with how to become an intentionally anti-racist faith because American and Western society have been wrestling with the legacy of and systems of racism and supremacy culture. We are just beginning to wonder and envision what it means to be an intentionally anti-racist religious faith... to move beyond advocacy and witness for racial justice and into wondering how the commitment to anti-racism calls us to change our assumptions about the religious communities we create. One of the shifts I see is away from “making space” in our congregations towards bringing non-dominant cultural conceptions to the center and challenging our communities adapt, rather than requiring those who come with marginalized identities to adapt to our church cultures.

I wonder if in the Unitarian Universalist church of the future the question is not how new members are integrated into our congregations, but how our congregations can change to include all who need our saving and transforming message of religious faith and community?

The pandemic did not create the transformation to a more digital culture in American society, but it did speed it up dramatically. Our congregations' shift to the digital world began as an emergency measure when we could not meet together in-person, but it has created a new way of engaging in religious community that we cannot let go of. Once you have created a form of accessibility, removing it is an injustice.

My wonder is about how we will continue to develop into being a religious community that occurs both in-person and in the digital world, because, frankly, sometimes you just need a Sunday morning in your pajamas and fuzzy slippers... and you still need that message of hope and community, of commitment and possibility.

And, if you are like me... perhaps you just cannot do in-person community the way you once did. I find myself wondering about all the ways our religious faith can and is moving into the digital world, and how the physical walls of our congregations are no longer the barriers they once were.

This has inspired one of the bigger wonderings I have had about the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Future, and that is how we will adopt new meanings around membership and commitment. How we are part of our religious communities has changed, with “the church” being far broader than it ever has been in the entire history of Unitarianism, Universalism, and Unitarian Universalism, and perhaps the category of “member” is too limiting for this new religious reality. We may need many ways of people being in relationship with a congregation, some that look more like the membership understanding we have long held, and some that might look radically different. What if anyone who shares the values of the congregation and participated in some, or even one of its programs, was fully a part of the church, and the church presented a pathway of deepening commitment rather than just a simple act of joining?

American culture around “belonging” was already changing before the pandemic. What if we saw church involvement and commitment as a spectrum more than a binary and we helped people to develop their sense of commitment as a journey?

What if those who have fallen away from a congregation really felt free to fall back in when their spirits called them to, with a message of love and acceptance from the congregation during their time away? What if you were always within the love and care of the community, whether you felt called to participate right now or not? Who knows, your journey back might begin with hot chocolate and PJ’s on a Sunday morning, just seeing what Rev. KP is talking about today online, because your soul feels empty? No one even need know you needed that ministry while wearing your fuzzy slippers...

Our conception of membership has often made the relationship to a congregation seem like a hard line, a yes or no... when in reality and within the development of American culture around belonging people flow in and out of relationship with church communities more than in the past. I wonder if the church of the future can embrace that, and respond not with senses of loss and guilt, but with a sense of gratitude and care.

This will mean that the church of the future will have to look for new ways to sustain the community and the faith, because so much of our sense of how to fulfill the resource needs of our congregations have been tied to membership in a single congregation. One of the transformations I wonder about is whether we can lean into the idea that, maybe, having every one of our congregations do everything themselves might not be sustainable.

My hope is that the church of the future will not be a single church alone, but will be Unitarian Universalists in many congregations sharing the mission of this transformative faith together, across congregational lines, both in the physical and in the digital world. Perhaps we don't all need 1000 different Sunday morning services. Perhaps we can learn to share... and begin to live the theology of interdependence that has long been a part of our living and covenantal religious faith.

Because, we need each other. Because sometimes those cultural changes happen slowly, but sometimes they happen all at once. We have moved into a time in both the United States and in the global culture and society where the changes are coming more rapidly than we are prepared for. Our nation was reckoning with systemic racial injustice before the pandemic began, and that reckoning is continuing. Global capitalism is failing as an economic system for the majority of humanity, and cannot long endure the level of wealth disparity it has created. The rise of global authoritarianism is leading to far greater instability in the world, with a greater potential for catastrophic wars than anytime since the 1940's. The damage we humans have done to the climate is now showing up in impacts upon our lives as never before. And hate is being once again weaponized as a tool to turn us against one another.

It is in times like these, when everything is changing, that the world most needs us. Most needs Unitarian Universalism. Most needs a religious faith that is not about trying to deny change, but to embrace the transformations all around us and through them find a way to be human, religiously.

And to do that... we need each other. All of us. To manifest and show how to care for one another amidst this changing, transforming world.

So may it be, blessed be, and amen.