

“New Year: New Plan”
 Reverend Sharon K. Dittmar
 First Unitarian Church
 536 Linton Avenue
 Cincinnati, Ohio 45219
 513.281.1564
 January 28, 2007

“Where there is no vision the people perish” Proverbs 29:18

Rabbi Barr from Congregation Beth Adam is considering a new car. His Volvo has over 230,000 miles on it. There is only AM radio. But he likes it. He is familiar with it. For years congregants have asked him to or joked with him to upgrade his automobile, perhaps embarrassed that their rabbi has such an old vehicle. For years, he has refused, until now.

As long as I have known Rabbi Barr he has had this car. For me it has always been a hallmark. It is him, but apparently it is not about to be him much longer. He told me “I like AM radio, but it is time for a change.” Proverbs 29:18, variously translated, tells us that “Where there is no vision the people perish.” Apparently Rabbi Barr has a new vision. So do we, but like an old, well-loved car, it is hard to leave the former one behind. This is the challenge of our new strategic plan. In just over an hour the voting members of this congregation will have the privilege and honor of exercising our 4th principle, that is, the use of the democratic process in our congregation, by voting to accept or reject the entire plan.

It’s an impressive document that began with a congregational survey a year and a half ago, which 61% of our 268 members completed. The survey was followed by focus groups, in which 53% of our members participated. Then there were the staff and committee interviews this past fall. This was a carefully crafted and executed process. I would like to invite the members of the strategic planning, Linnea Lose, Sue Shidaker, Anne Wallace, and Charles Weilbaker to stand so that we can thank you for your efforts. I would also like to invite previous members of the strategic planning committee to stand so that we may thank you as well. I would now like to invite other members who participated, as focus group facilitators, or hosts or all those members who filled out a survey or participated in a focus group (including our senior high students), to please stand. Thank you. This is the exercise of our 4th principle at work.

Unlike other organizations you may have been with, First Church actually enacts the suggestions of our strategic plan. Previously we followed a successful plan from 2002 – 2007, which enabled us to both raise the capital funds to renovate our building, and to recruit and retain more members and visitors.

We have had much success with our strategic plans, and this one will be similar, except that it introduces us to a significant new challenge, refitting our “old car,” our current vision of ourselves so that we can move forward. And change always brings challenge, but, this is the change that you have asked for, this is the change you introduced in your surveys and focus groups. This, apparently, is our new vision. In case

you have not had copious time to read this document cover to cover, let me introduce it to you.

To begin with, there are the demographics. From the members who filled out the survey we know that our median age is 59 years, 65% of us are female, 66% of us have master's degrees or more (which accounts for our plethora of pithy opinions), 93% of us are Caucasian (the remainder being African American, Hispanic, Asian, and multi-ethnic), and 25% of us have children in the religious education program. Theologically, 24% of us are agnostic, and this was the largest agreed upon theological category. This is the average profile at most UU congregations, only we are a bit more racially mixed.

Most interesting, and attesting to the success of the last strategic plan, 1/3 of us have been members for less than five years, and 1/4 of us have been members for over 25 years. The rest of us fall in several categories in the middle. So we have a significant minority of new and long time members, which is healthy. Our members are also satisfied with what they find here. Over 3/4 of our members are strongly satisfied with the extent to which First Church meets our spiritual and ethical needs.

Here's where you shocked me though, 84% of us favor growth, the vast majority recommending moderate growth for a total of 375 members. 375 members?!? I'm not making this up. This is what you said.

You are concerned about our ability to plan for and manage collaborative growth in communications, technology, staffing, membership, financing, leadership, governance, structure, and volunteerism. For 375 members you are correct, all of these areas will need planned and managed in new ways, hence the need for a new car. Our current systems of management, leadership, and coordination simply cannot accomplish the growth we have requested.

Our strategic plan has been described as a living document, a work of our creation that is still being created. Even after the vote today, which I hope and assume will be positive, we will create and alter the plan. I was very interested in the accountability of this plan. The Board and Strategic Planning Committees expect committee work and annual committee reports to be based on this plan. This is a significant change. In the past committees sort of went their own way based on committee personality.

Now every committee and leader, including me, is more accountable. You said loud and clear that you want better process to determine social justice projects, so our social justice committee is at work on that right now. You said that you want more integration between children and adult on Sunday mornings, and we are doing that now with children in at the start of every service and several Sundays a year devoted to shared worship topics for children and adults. You sent the minister a very clear mandate to maintain and improve worship services, which I am working on. The strategic plan also makes it clear how much we must work together (instead of being lone rangers).

Recently Congregation Beth Adam hired a consultant, the Reverend Dan Hotchkiss, a Unitarian Universalist minister who works with the Alban Institute, to advise them on their growth issues (and believe me, First Church and Beth Adam share many of the same issues). Reverend Hotchkiss informed Rabbi Barr that he believes there should not be committees at Congregation Beth Adam, but task forces and the task forces are commissioned by the Board to complete general tasks ("Quality worship," "diverse music," "building safety," "financial security"). If tasks are not completed in a timely and proficient manner (because of course, under his model everyone is fairly

evaluated, even committees) the task force should be dismissed. Under Reverend Hotchkiss's model the Board deals only with governance and sets goals and then charges committees and staff people to "make it so." If they don't "make it so," task forces are dismissed and another group is given the charge.

This is not how we operate and I am not suggesting that we run straight into the arms of this model. But the model did give me pause for thought when Rabbi Barr told me about it. As a congregation that has long prided itself on being "nice," at times we have put up with situations and problems longer than was healthy or reasonable. We haven't always held committees or people accountable for a range of things from good behavior to getting the job done in a timely fashion.

Our worship theme for the year is "Energy for What Matters," and I dare mention these things because they do matter, and matter very much for our growth, safety, education, and frankly, Unitarian Universalist values. I am not proposing that we "fire" committees, nor is that what is suggested in the strategic plan, but the strategic plan does call for accountability and this is good and this is needed if we are to grow. We can not grow without more accountability. We cannot create the improved governance structure needed to lead a congregation of 375 members without more leadership implementation and accountability.

And this really is about living our values. How can we live a vision of our Universalist roots, that of God's love and human goodness, if we don't meet the pastoral needs of all our members, from newborn to elderly, new members to old members? How can we live the vision of being a vibrant urban congregation if we do not hire and empower with resources and a budget either a congregational administrator or building manager to coordinate and manage facility management and use issues (which at times now is overwhelming)? How can we embrace our larger UU movement and diversity if we don't take on an intern minister, a student minister in training who would bring a different voice, someone who can teach and learn from us while we teach and learn from her or him?

How can we increase growth if our endowment fund is not professional managed? For years, select members have volunteered and done their best investing our endowment funds. Thank you. And through their efforts we now have a terrific problem; our endowment is worth over \$600,000. Which one of us is qualified enough to invest this amount of money without professional assistance. Which one of us wants to bear this burden for the congregation? I don't think that this is a fair question to ask of any of us anymore. The UUA has professional advisors who share our values and can help us to better invest our endowment (which would offer us more capital to pay for additional programming, staff, and maintenance which we have asked for).

This week our Board President, Barb Rider, sent me this quote from J. P. Kotter, author of *8 Steps for Successful Large Scale Change*

Leadership [is] the development of vision and strategies, the alignment of relevant people behind those strategies, and the empowerment of individuals to make the vision happen, despite obstacles. This stands in contrast with management, which involves keeping the current system operating through planning, budgeting, organizing, staffing, controlling, and problem solving. Leadership works through people and culture . . . Management works through hierarchy and systems.

This is essentially the same thing that Heifetz said in our reading for this morning. Management is about control. Leadership is about vision and guidance, facing problems, talking about them, learning from them, making new values based decisions, and ultimately growing.

To be honest, let me clarify that First Church is not remotely in crisis, on anything. We have time, energy, an excellent mission statement, a good Sunday program, and dedicated members. Sure we have challenges and problems, but we have no crisis. But without a vision the people perish or get bored, or descend into petty fiefdoms, micromanagement, and squabbles, or worse, live beneath their potential. In her email to me Barb quoted Kotter who writes “the most important aspect of implementing change is establishing a crystal clear vision of the target outcome.” Barb inquired “What’s the target outcome at First Church?” What is our target outcome? Is it personal spiritual/ethical development? Is it better social justice work? Is it more members? Is it an earth made fair and all her people one? What’s our target outcome?

I don’t know but I might suggest something like “For every member and visitor to be both comforted and challenged to actively meet their higher potential as religious liberals in community and as individuals.” Those of you who heard me on the radio yesterday might have heard me quote the great 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr who said that the purpose of preaching is to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”

This sermon is about afflicting our comfort zones at First Church, not because I want to cause pain, but because people and organizations do not grow into their fullest potential, do not face the problems that slow them down, without the challenge to improve and change. An active life of relevant faith, a life spent doing worthwhile work in a religious community involves honest discomfort. An active faith life leads to introspection, awareness, insight and the desire to do better and make active change. The sanctuary of faith and congregational life goes hand in hand with the challenge they hold. Every relevant faith life on this planet involves both sanctuary and challenge. Without sanctuary there is no sustaining faith, without challenge there is no relevance.

If we want better programming and communications, improved worship, governance, and process, more collaboration and leadership, a greater acceptance of our own diversity, if we want to face these problems, all of which you asked for loud and clear in the strategic plan, we need to move from management to leadership. We need to use, not just file away, our new strategic plan. We need to honestly thank our many volunteers and honestly assess what can still be done with volunteers and what realistically needs to be done by employees or a professional consultant, and then we need to fund these changes and give these individuals and groups the authority to do the work we asked them to complete.

You know, we will be fine without any of this. Except that year in and year out you will complain that there is not enough programming, which there isn’t, that our process for major decisions is weak, which sometimes it is, that our leaders are unequipped, which sometimes they are, that not enough members volunteer, which sometimes they don’t. I suggest we stop complaining and start facing and changing our problems. To that end, I have asked the Board, my supervisor, to evaluate me based on the recommendation of the strategic plan. I want to be held accountable to its

expectations of the minister of this congregation. I want a new evaluation form that reflects the relevance of what we need in our minister and I intend to meet or exceed each goal. That is my goal.

I challenge each of you on a committee to do the same. Read the report; find your committee's role and what is expected. If some part of your committee work that is relevant is not named, talk to strategic planning. This is a living document. We need to continue to add to it and learn from it and one another. Revelation is continuous. You can vote "yes" on it today and add to it the next day and the next day, etc. I hope we do. I think that we should.

I invite you to have your committee honestly and kindly evaluate yourself at the end of the year based on the report. And for those of you who wish some committee would offer more of something, I suggest that you volunteer to serve on that committee and make a positive difference, not a complaining difference, a positive difference. What will you do to be the change you would like to see? This is the challenge of a relevant faith life.

The future is in our hands. I am completely confident that this congregation has the skills and wisdom to adjust to this change, to mourn the losses it brings, and to welcome the new and the abundance it brings. You are kind, committed people, and we have done so much already. You can't tell me that changing our organizational structure will be harder than raising funds for a capital campaign and fairly deciding how to spend the money on multiple competing issues.

We've already done the heavy lifting. Let's go the rest of the way, and know that the struggle of adaptation is worth the journey. Really, it is a metaphor for life. All our lives we are adapting, and if we honestly face this need, adaptation is a gift that helps us grow inside and out. We are the people who believe that no book is sealed, that revelation is continuous, that there is more out there than AM radio. Shouldn't our life here mirror this vision? May it always be so.