

## **Why We Exist**

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When I first came as your minister in 1998 I knew a couple of things. First, I knew that the members were sincere and committed, which is the main reason I was and still am drawn to this congregation. I knew that First Church had a long history and a beautiful, though decaying building. I knew that you were an urban church which matched many of my interests in social justice. My father pointed out to me that due to my age, I would probably out serve the majority of staff (he was right, at this point only our custodian has been here longer than I). I knew that you expected quality worship and good pastoral care. This is what I knew.

What I didn't know is if you/we would survive. I wasn't worried about our relationship. I was concerned with membership which had been declining for almost a decade when I arrived. Given the struggles of an urban, commuting church to attract members, to support an old facility, and the growing national need for professional, accountable congregational management (a change from previous generations), First Church was in a more precarious position than many of you realized. And I didn't tell you because I didn't want to scare you. I was certain that I would not be the minister to "close" this congregation. But I was not sure if you would make it another thirty years.

As much as I am the minister and do lead in part, I knew that given our congregational polity, where members have a lot of power and responsibility demonstrated by your voting rights and financial decision making, the final decision on survival in our future was yours to make, not mine. I could be a partner in leadership, but a leader only leads as far as the followers follow. One minister could not convert a congregation to life. How many of you were here when I came ten years ago?

The Chinese have a symbol that indicated both crisis and opportunity. Around seven years ago we faced that watershed when the sanctuary roof buttresses slid to the point of being "unsound." After one hundred and ten years of deferred maintenance they gave out. This crisis meant we could no longer meet in the sanctuary until "our friend" the steel pole was inserted to prop up the buttresses. This crisis was our turning point. This is when you chose to live.

The silent reserve and commitment of many members came forward. We needed to fix the roof, at a cost of more than \$300,000. But you didn't stop there, you realized there were other needs and voted on an ambitious renovation plan you successfully financed. And you learned "If you build it, they will come." New visitors and members arrived and you chose to welcome them. You chose to live. I no longer questioned our survival. I started to wonder how we were going to thrive and everything changed once again.

At the very beginning of our capital campaign I remember speaking to Rabbi Barr. Rabbi Barr asked me, "Why do you exist? Would it matter if you closed your doors? Why are you worth a capital campaign? If you shut your doors today would it

matter?” As difficult as this was for me to hear, I recognized the leadership questions. His questions provoked an existential “crisis” for me. Why do we exist? Why do we matter? I was provoked because I didn’t have a good answer, and this distressed me.

We had good worship services. I provided good pastoral care. So? There are three other lay led Unitarian Universalist congregations in Cincinnati. If we shut our doors would anyone miss us? Rabbi Barr’s questions led me to the realization that irrelevance REALLY bothers me. We have UU principles and values that I treasure. This congregation has a legacy 178 years old, the oldest Unitarian congregation in the west with a long history of civic involvement. What are we doing with this? Why do we matter?

Before we began our capital campaign we hired a UUA consultant, Jerry King, who made us start by creating a mission statement. We fussed, we fumed. We said it was a waste of time. And then we attended small group discussions and from these results a small group of lay members created the mission statement we have today. In retrospect, the most important element of our capital campaign was not bricks or dollars, but this statement and what it means, how it has guided us and continues to do so.

I did not realize the value of the mission statement when it was created. In retrospect I have learned its value. It explains why we exist. It explains why it matters that our doors are kept open. It helps us make decisions on staff, programs, social justice projects, facility maintenance, and prioritization of projects. Our mission statement is posted in my office and in the Fisher Room, and I use it on a daily basis. One of my requests here this morning is that we take the statement in the Fisher Room, blow it up even larger, mat and frame it, so that everyone knows where it is and can easily read it when they are stuck. I am hoping the Board will spend a couple hundred dollars to make this happen. Perhaps side by side we could print, enlarge, mat and frame our UU principles and sources because these two documents drive us now.

When we were a smaller congregation individuals created, sometimes funded, and executed projects on their own. So did committees. Communication with other groups, whether the Board or Finance or a partner committee, was variable. Someone repaired something with their own time and money. Something was advertised with our congregations name without the Board knowing about it. Something was “paid” for with congregational funds before any discussion took place at Finance or within a committee. Individuals argued about musical styles based solely on personal preference. Committees were frustrated that they had to bring any major plan to the Board and critical when the Board asked relevant leadership questions or put the brakes on a project because it lacked clarity or hadn’t been budgeted. We were a group of lone rangers running around with individual agendas, using them like weapons. Some of us had individual fiefdoms.

Honestly, this will always be a challenge for us as Unitarian Universalists due to our congregational polity. Congregational polity gives the lay members the privileges of decision making and leadership. We set our own budget. We are self-funded. We call our own minister. We can choose to ignore an issue or suggestion from the UUA, our central organizing body. Technically, we are not even a denomination. We are part of an association of congregations that has freely covenanted to be together. We have a lot of freedom. And with freedom comes responsibility.

Congregational polity also requires a covenantal relationship. Covenant requires that we are in honest, respectful, shared relationship with one another, our neighboring

UU congregations, and the UUA. Covenant has no room for lone rangers. Covenant says that what we do here must be larger than any individual or we have no purpose for gathering as a religious community. We have engaged in self serving idolatry.

The great twentieth century liberal theologian, Paul Tillich, said that everything of ultimate meaning must be infinite (like justice, dignity, and respect for the web of life). According to Tillich, a faith life focused on finite meaning (money, numbers, power) is idolatrous. His point is that a self serving faith that never challenges is limiting and meaningless. A healthy life of faith encompasses a mission statement similar to ours, and that goes beyond individual opinions, dollars, resources, control, and knowledge.

Mission creates why we exist, why we matter. Our mission and UU values are our common thread regardless of variations in theology, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, political, musical, or dietary preferences, transportation, and TV viewing habits, what we have in common is our UU values and mission statement (question at meet minister if we welcome Republicans).

As much as I treasure our congregational polity I have come to realize that when unexamined, it is a hindrance to our growth in faith, members, and mission. When we spend hours appeasing a member, we have disregarded our mission. When we uplift consensus as a model instead of mission lived through our UU values, we have diminished our purpose and ultimate meaning. When we allow a committee to execute a project without respect to our mission or communication with other relevant committees, we have wasted our shared resources. Our purpose is not to please individual members. Any therapist would tell you that is a set up for failure. It would be like having a favorite child that gets the best snack every day. It violates the meaning of covenant.

How could that possibly meet our standard of “respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person” and “the interdependent web of life.” If everyone is equally important, no one person is more important than another. To continually exceed to one person or group, the squeaky wheel, is favoritism. It’s also ego warping. It teaches individuals to focus inside on themselves, and neglects an essential faith development step of seeing oneself as part of a larger whole, that you and I are part of the interdependent web (something of ultimate meaning beyond oneself), the vast whole of our congregation, faith, country, and world.

No one here is being asked to give up their rights. But no one person’s rights are more important than any others. And if we are just in the business of individual rights we mine as well just go home. Because that is not the business of a faith community. We are in the business of ultimate meaning, the greater than, the challenge of finding what is greater than one individual in the whole of many people in community. That is our business here. Lived through our UU values that are our only business here.

Why do we exist? Because together we can do more than we can do alone. I am a UU minister. Here is a short list of things I can’t do alone. I can’t successfully educate my son on how to be a UU, alone. I can’t reduce gun violence in our city, alone. I can’t apologize to the Carter family, alone. I can’t fund the work of this congregation, alone. I can’t plan worship, alone. I can’t be in the production of Godspell, alone. I can’t register Avondale voters, alone. I can’t minister to the pastoral needs of our congregants, alone. I can’t pay for a rabbi or Muslim to educate us on their faiths, alone. I can’t be your religious leader, alone. I need to partner with the Board. I can’t even conduct a New U orientation, or remember all your names, alone.

Your list is probably similar to mine. But together, we are educating my son and your children, we are reducing gun violence, we did apologize to the Carter family and it changed us and them for the better, forever. The first Carter reconciliation service in 2001 was one of our most transformative endeavors. That moment when Starita Smith said “We accept your apology.” Three months later this city was ripped apart by police violence and riots. Yet before and after we have stood for truth and reconciliation. That’s holy ground friends.

Together we do fund this congregation, we did put on Godspell, and we did register Avondale voters. One of the most transformative memories I have here is during the 2004 election, the many members who registered voters without evangelizing, regardless of party, and drove those too tired or poor or ill to come to the polls and vote. That’s why we exist. In this one endeavor we lived all our UU values and mission statement. Regardless of any election outcome I knew we had made a positive community difference.

Recently Lydia McMillan sent me an email about an experience she had on a Ceasefire canvas

I received an unexpected phone call from Amy Krings-Barnes from Ceasefire. She just wanted to say thank you for the wonderful turnout at the shooting response . . . with the rain she was concerned that turnout would be very low (particularly since she had received a phone call that channel 5 news would be joining us on the walk) but to her surprise there were 7 persons from First Unitarian (Dot Christenson, Joy Haupt, Ginny and Fritz Casey Leininger, Joan Johnson, Betsy Gotwals and myself). She was inspired with our energy and desire to walk even with the rain. We motivated her staff who were ready to cancel the walk.

Not only are we transformed, but we have the power to transform others through ultimate meaning. When we live our values and mission statement we each have the opportunity to be positively challenged and transformed, and this is something unique offered by a community of faith. Your favorite issue might be respectfully voted down with due process at a congregational meeting, and you might be transformed by an experience of the whole and then go transform others, something we do here together of ultimate meaning that none of us could do here alone.

Just this last week I held an impromptu meeting with some of our GLBTQ members to get their thoughts on how welcoming we are and if we can be more welcoming. I had this idea, placed it next to our mission statement, saw a great match, and held our meeting. When I make decisions on how to do what in which order, I look at our mission statement for guidance. It says “nurture a caring and welcoming community,” “reach out to persons looking for a religious community like ours,” “encourage congregants to be open to ideas and philosophies different from their own,” and “to focus on social justice programs where we can be most effective” among other things. Yes this meeting was worth my time because it meets the criteria of values and mission.

What I learned is that I need to explore the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) which I will do in the coming year. What I also learned is that our GLBTQ members do

not care if I participate in the Pride Worship service, they didn't even know there is one (which is great because now I can stop feeling guilty for not participating). But they thought it would be very meaningful, and make a significant statement if our congregation walked in the annual June Pride Parade with T-shirts, banners, and enthusiasm declaring that we are welcoming.

As one group participant said to me "LGBTQ folks look to see who walks in the parade and then they go church shopping . . . I want to know who is proud enough to walk down this street and embrace our community." Hearing that last question transformed me. Because I am proud enough to walk down that street during Gay Pride. She also told me that First Church has a reputation as being unwelcoming, although that has not been her experience. In fact, every participant in the meeting felt we were truly welcoming to them and everyone else, but that the GLBTQ community does not know this.

Well, let's inform them. It is too late for this year unless there is a spontaneous ground swell as of today (parade is next week), and I will be so proud if you do. However, next year, 2009, I will be there and hope to garner the loudest, noisiest coalition of UUs to walk and to do this year after year until everyone in Cincinnati knows we are welcoming because that is who we are in our values and mission. I can't do this alone, and neither can you. We can only do this together.

Deference to mission and values shapes everything I do now. In just ten years I have gone from asking myself "Will we survive?" to "In which direction will we thrive?" I can now answer Rabbi Barr's question about why we exist. We are the only congregation in Cincinnati with our mission statement and values and they make a positive difference for ourselves and others. It would be a terrible community loss if we shut our doors. Our reputation grows year after year. In my work in the city I regularly hear things like "You worked on Habitat houses, you walked in Ceasefire when no one else was there, you worked to repeal Article XII, you supported Cincinnati Public Schools, you have supported the Muslim community in a time of intolerance, you have housed the homeless, you support the Urban League, you help poor high school students who can't graduate and go to college because they have unpaid late fees. As UUs we say it is about deeds, not creeds. And by our deeds, we are widely known.

First Church is so much bigger than what any one person wants or thinks or knows, including me. Let's have an honest moment here. I love you and I love my work but I do not love getting up early on Sunday morning. I am not an early morning person, something that two Sunday services will require of me. You might be worried about community feel or RE volunteers, but I am worried about getting up really early on Sunday morning. Truly, it will be a personal loss for me, in terms of Saturday evening and Sunday morning, my weekends, my family time and free time. If you were to personally ask me if I want two services, my answer is "No, I don't want to change my weekends." But two services is not about me personally and it never will be. Two services is about our values and mission as a congregation and it always will be.

The first barrier to congregational growth at this size is the clergy. The second barrier is the laity.<sup>1</sup> This is well documented. Clergy don't want change and they won't get out of the way of congregational need and mission. I don't want to be that minister.

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<sup>1</sup> Roy M. Oswald, "How to Minister Effectively in Family, Pastoral, Program, and Corporate Sized Churches," printed in *Size Transitions in Congregations* (2001).

The people have spoken and I respect your decision, and your ambivalence. I also think it is the best one based on values and mission, "to nurture a caring and welcoming community," "to encourage all congregants to participate actively in membership growth," "to reach out to persons looking for a religious community like ours," "to explore the responsibilities of being an urban church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century."

I am a Unitarian Universalist, a minister, and a person of faith because I want to be challenged and transformed by life in a religious community. I will lose more of my weekends, but I expect to be positively transformed in ways that I could never anticipate that will make my life and the life of this congregation and those we touch, more meaningful. This is of ultimate meaning and something I can only help create here in beloved community and for that I am extremely grateful because we are relevant. After some thought, it is also all I need to know in order to create the best two services possible. You have my word. May it always be so.