

Commitment to Unitarian Universalism 4/20/08

Good Morning! It's great to be here with you today to talk about Unitarian Universalism, which is the religion of values and principles, which we all strive to practice. We are also going to talk about the Unitarian Universalist Association, the UUA, which is the association of member Unitarian Universalist churches in the United States. Without the UUA, each Unitarian Universalist church would be completely alone. Since so many of the churches have fewer than 100 members, their voice in the world would be just a whisper.

By gathering together into an association, all of the little churches get to have a bigger voice and representatives who go out into the world to speak our viewpoint. Since many of us here at New Hope are somewhat new to Unitarian Universalism, and since I just got back from the Annual Heartland District meeting of the UUA, this seemed like a good time to share with you some of what I learned.

Do you know that there are about 160,000 UU's in about 1000 churches divided into 20 regional districts all around this country? Michigan, western Ohio, Indiana and Kentucky make up our Heartland District. Each UU church is autonomous, and governs itself through a policy called congregational polity. That means each church calls its own minister, has power over its own purse, and makes its own decisions.

The association is not a hierarchy, like some churches that have bishops or high priests. The UUA is based on democratic principles and bylaws, which have been agreed upon by the

member congregations. Congregational Polity and Unitarians and Universalists have been around since the founding of our country. In fact many of our early government leaders were either Unitarians or Universalists. The UUA is not a perfect system by any means and like all systems, it is subject to the imperfections of the people who manage it. But in a lot of ways, it serves our purposes well.

The two groups, the Unitarians and the Universalists, merged into one organization in the early 1960's. The resulting association, the UUA, provides many services for districts and churches, such as: developing religious education curricula for children and adults, sponsoring professional trainings for ministers, religious educators, and church leaders, providing consultations about financial and staffing issues, setting fair compensation guidelines for staff, that churches should strive to follow, and helping to provide district services in each of the regions.

The association headquarters is located at 25 Beacon Street in Boston, right next door to the Massachusetts Statehouse. It's a very impressive brownstone building right in the heart of historic Boston and within a short walk of several UU churches. Boston is probably the only city in the country with as many Unitarian churches as other denominations!

The UUA is governed by the rulings of delegates from every church, who gather each year at the General Assembly. There is also a Board of Trustees, made up of representatives from each district that meets during the rest of the year in Boston.

Both the association and the district collect fair share donations from all member churches to support the work of the association on a national and regional level. I actually spent

3 years on the Annual Program Fund Executive Committee at the UUA, which gave me opportunity to see the association work up close and personal.

In the same way that the work of the association is approved by the delegates of the General Assembly, the Heartland district holds an Annual Meeting each year to elect officers, approve the budget, and provide education about important issues that pertain to the churches.

The theme of this year's meeting was "Sustainable Stewardship". The topic holds a lot of interest for me because of the years I served on the Annual Program Fund Committee. What I learned on the APF is that the financial health of congregations depends on much more than the collection of money to pay the bills. Lots of times churches bog down in the everyday details of building maintenance, salaries, yard work and snow removal. We forget to focus on the really important stuff like: Why we do we exist? What role do we play in our community? How does our liberal religious presence make our community a better place? What's our vision for the future? If we were to go away, would anyone besides us notice?

Wayne Clark, the UUA Director of Congregational Stewardship Services was the keynote speaker at the meeting. "Going Forth" is the name of the new stewardship program he spoke about.

"Going Forth" helps churches to focus on the "Reality of Abundance". So many times, church members accept the "myths of scarcity". They go something like: "Our congregation is poor, we have always been poor, and we will always be poor." Or, "If people only understood the dire straits

of the church, they would feel guilty and increase their annual giving.” Or “Except for a very small group of committed leaders, no one else is willing to step up to the plate.”

In my almost 20 years of working in churches, I’ve heard all of these statements many times. The Reality of Abundance, which has five components, acknowledges the truth, that people are willing to give their time and their resources to organizations that really matter to them. That’s why you find poor people tithing 10% of their incomes to their Evangelical Churches.

So what are the five components of the Reality of Abundance? And how do they relate to New Hope?

The first one is “We need to look at ourselves and ask”: what are our strengths? What are we really good at doing? The answers to these questions reveal what is unique about our congregation and why it’s important to us? Then we need to build on those strengths, rather than worrying about our weaknesses.

Positive thinking goes a long ways to shaping our attitudes about success. What comes to mind about New Hope is our ability to deal with changing circumstances and our remodeling skills. We are really good at shaping our space to reflect our values. Most of all we are welcoming to newcomers. We try to practice terrific hospitality here.

The second component of the Reality of Abundance is to “Ask Appreciative Questions” such as: What do we need to make us a better church? How are we different from other churches? What would be missed if we went away? Why are we here? These questions, answered in community, help us to form our

vision for our church. What do we want to be like in five years? New Hope hasn't had a lot of time to do visioning in its short existence. We've been too busy remodeling and moving and remodeling again. One of my hopes for New Hope is that we are able to settle down and think about our mission and vision sometime in the near future.

The third component of the Reality of Abundance is to "Share the happy, successful stories of church". I went to a training in Wisconsin a few years ago, led by Parker Palmer, a famous theologian and educator. Palmer emphasized how important it is for churches to tell their good stories, which emphasize their successes, rather than their sad stories, which people always seem to want to tell over and over. When people keep repeating the sad stories, then they make everyone feel upset and bad about what happened in the past, even those people who weren't actually there at the time the events occurred.

Positive stories have the opposite effect. When people hear those, they feel great. New members feel uplifted by the wonderful history of the church and soon those stories belong to them also. Remembering the positive and downplaying the negative helps members of the community to feel more connected to each other and to feel hopeful about their future together.

Wayne Clark contends that if you ask people to share their stories about church they always deal with relationships and people, not with money or bricks and mortar. We have some great New Hope stories about being zapped by zoning laws and zipping down the road. We have remodeling stories about learning the proper way to use a paint sprayer. Ask Frank Finken, if you need a lesson. We have all of our firsts, our first Christmas tree, our first Seder, our first bonfire. We have our

wonderful building dedication and our minister affirmation. In our short time together, we have many happy stories to share.

The Fourth Component of the Reality of Abundance is to “Make a Compelling Case” to the congregation about the good work of the church. How does my contribution and my participation in this church make a difference in the world? Clark says that church members want to feel they are a part of a thriving, successful community, not a sinking ship. Coming to church on Sunday mornings should renew our spirits and strengthen our friendships. We should feel that together we can accomplish good in the world that we might not be able to do alone.

Supporting Renee’s trip to Peru and contributing educational and personal care items for the citizens of the village there would not have been possible, if she hadn’t included us in her plans and if we hadn’t worked together. The same with the 3 families we adopted at Christmas and provided with gifts and food. Together we were able to meet all their holiday requests and then add some surprises to their Santa bags. Together we can do great things!

And the fifth component of the Reality of Abundance is to “Celebrate our Successes.” Yes, we did it! The Gemini concert was a great success for the second year in a row! Not only did we have lots of fun working together, but we brought in people from the community who have never been in New Hope before. Maybe the next time they see Rev. Suzanne’s column in the newspaper, they’ll remember what a good time they had at our concert and decide to check us out some Sunday morning. My experience here at New Hope has been that we are good at the celebration thing. Parties lift our spirits and create community. How lucky we are to be part of a church where members know how to laugh and have a good time together!

Wayne Clark spoke for about 3 times as long as you want to listen to me this morning, but I'd be glad to tell you more about his speech and about the Heartland District Annual meeting, if you ask me after church. Besides the talk, there were workshops about leadership, finance and religious education. There was a district business meeting where we approved the budget and elected new members of the Board of Trustees. And we also had two wonderful worship services together, which reminded us of the principles and ideals, which we hold in common.

As an emerging Unitarian Universalist congregation, New Hope is in the process of becoming a member of the UUA. It is a process with several steps and we are in discussion with the Acting District Executive and moving forward. Attending a district or national meeting is a gratifying and satisfying experience.

It's good to know that there are many others across the region and the country that share our faith. It's good to know that we are not the lone liberal religious voice crying out in the wilderness. It's imperative that our children understand that they are part of a much larger community with shared values and a shared religious history. Together we may not be able to move mountains, but we can certainly hold the next generation in our hands, and strive to make the world a more peaceful, more just, more loving place.