

OCTOBER 25, 2015

Church Update and Sermon: “The Universalist Experience”

Jon Wheeler

Update (from the lectern)

Good morning again. I do have a sermon, well...let's call it an “experience” for you this morning but if you allow me to take a few minutes as one of your lay leaders to give you an update on the state of the church broadly and more specifically the work we have to do as a community during this reflective and transition time with Len so that we can most effectively select and welcome a new settled minister in 2017.

First, let me underscore there are many-many wonderful things about our church... we do many things well. But these are challenging times for most main stream church denominations who are experiencing declining membership and increased financial issues...we are not immune to these broader social forces. And we know there are things in our recent history that we could have done better which have compounded these challenges. In the near term, we collectively will improve the way we do some things around here. But these external forces raise the tension and the challenge of staying true to who we are at a mission and values level while trying some new ways of doing things to help us be ever more relevant and vibrant...more on this to come during this church year but the notion of an interim minister is to give us some time and space to think through who we are, where we see ourselves going...and just to be a little provocative, not selecting a permanent minister who “we want based just on where we've been”, but also a permanent or “settled” minister “we need to help us move forward towards our community aspirations”. So during this church year, you can expect a community wide survey and engagement process to help us answer key questions like:

- What is our enduring mission, is our 1990's version still hold true?
- In addition to the UUA 7 principles, are there some unique values, i.e, what's really important to us here at the West Hartford Universalist Church?...You'll see hung in Fiske both our mission statement and UU principles as a reminder and the beginning of our thinking process.

- And...do we have a vision we're aiming for in the horizon...maybe some aspirations tied to our 200 year celebration in 5 years?
- What does worship, education, fellowship, service and stewardship look like and where do we choose to focus our energies and our resources?
- And maybe the most important...how do the answers to the preceding questions translate in to what it's like to be a member here? ...call it our "Fern St. Universalist Experience"?

These are some pretty big questions that conventional wisdom says the more clarity we have to the answers, like the fidelity of a picture, the better the quality of the picture, the better job we'll do selecting a new minister who is capable and motivated to guide us on our path...the minister we need to move us forward versus the minister we might want to say, simply rebuild the past. Make no mistake, our new minister will put her/his fingerprints all over our journey and I'm not suggesting it's a total clean sheet of paper, likely much if not most of what we do here will stay the same, but we have to face the "relevancy realities" going on around us and match our aspirations with what will "click" with our inactive members who, for whatever reason have drifted away from us, the current members who we owe so much and the emerging generation of church members. Let me also say, that our foundation, this loving and caring community, what we hope a current member or new person experiences every time they/you enter through the front or the back door, will not change. The warm embrace of welcome for who ever you are, wherever you are on your life's and spiritual journey.

The Board and Len are envisioning engaging with the members through a survey and discussions in to 2016 with the goal of having sufficient clarity by the end of the church year on where we are heading so we can properly engage in the search process and call a new settled minister in 2017.

OK...so that's the macro longer term view, but first, we have some more practical areas to focus on over the next 2-3 months...folks...we have some work to do:

The first area of focus and actually a question is, for a church our current size and with our current resources, what is the right staffing model? The Board has asked Len to assess and propose the structure and responsibilities for our paid staff. Because of a decline in income, driven principally because of a decline in membership and therefore pledges, we have roughly half the number of paid

positions compared to 5 years ago. And let me publicly note, the average pledge amount has gone up each year, for those of us here, we've been giving more, so thank you! The question is, what's the best way to organize and utilize the staff we have? This is leading to some changes across every role...some will be dramatic...you heard it first here.

The second area of focus is the flip side of this...member volunteerism. With reductions in staff... we need members to be carrying more of the load...which can and should be a positive experience. Let me put out the call right now, whether you realize it or not, everyone one here is part of the extended membership committee. We all need to step out, welcome inactive members back and be as welcoming as possible to new faces in our sanctuary and events. And, we also need more folks to volunteer to help with the more organized and formal membership services activities. WE all loved Martha but we don't have her and so we have to step in. WE also need help with maintaining the building...from a long term "engineering" perspective and a near term maintenance/handyman perspective...so Len is forming a B & G committee. We need members to lean in to our religious education program as teachers even if you don't have kids. These are just the beginning folks, we need everyone to find a way and place to "lean in". You can approach Len, me, Tracey or any member of the staff. We need your help!

We also need clarity on where these and all of the other committees, fellowship groups and the dozens of other volunteers get the direction and support they need. In this regard, the Board will hold a volunteer "collective wisdom" workshop where we hope the many volunteer leaders and any others who are interested will come together Saturday morning November 14th for a couple hours to discuss and get aligned around how we...the Board, the volunteers and the staff work more effectively together. We won't get it perfect, but we know we can do better. After the workshop, for those who can stay, we'll roll up our sleeves and help Sue Wilson and the members of her team set up for the Service Auction that evening. So if you are currently a volunteer leader, want to be one, or a volunteer who's is just curious, join us. Please sign up on the bulletin Board or call Lisa in the church office so we know how much coffee to make and bagels to bring.

And finally, our financial challenges. As members you need and deserve to know where we stand. We are down income from \$670k in 2012 to an expected \$550K in 2015. As I mentioned, with that decline have been reductions in number of ministers, membership services, food ministry, choir section leads, administrative

staff, programs, fair share support of the UUA and maintenance of our building. In an effort to reverse this trend, the Board, and note this is no longer pure policy governance folks, the Board has assumed direct responsibilities for the budget and instituted a treasurer position, reporting to the Board which, thankfully Pete Begin has agreed to assume with the very capable support of Rob Thompson. A preliminary 2016 budget has been developed and reviewed by the Board. Even with the reduced staff and many other cost cuts, and note, we're now down to B & W orders of service from color to save \$18 per week.. if the Stewardship campaign raises the same level as last year, \$375k, we will run a deficit in 2016 of \$50,000 with the only recourse to once again "drain" from the endowment which equals a total over \$300k or approximately 20% of the endowment over the past 4 years. And based on what the Board and Len are hearing, the congregation would like to add choir section leads and maybe an intern minister like we had with Meagan a few years ago so we have more ministerial pastoral care support... especially for our elders, minister lead summer services and, sorry Len, some youthful energy that will raise our appeal to younger generations. These "investments" will add \$25,000 in expense to the budget. So if you do the math, we've asked the Stewardship committee to aim their sights on \$450k in pledges. If we have the same number of pledges as last year, that's a 20% increase for every pledge.

So let me be very-very clear, during the current stewardship campaign, we need everyone to reflect on what this church means to you and reach as deeply as you can in to your financial resources to help us break this cycle of reductions and cuts and maintain vitality of this church. Don't wait for a knock on your door...we need everyone to lean in during the campaign...now! The Board will continue to listen to the congregation on what you see as our priorities and do our best to match our resources. We plan to bring back to a town hall meeting in January the budget plan for 2016. And again, let's be clear...the congregation is draining money from the endowment, not the Board...the outcome of the campaign will be determined by all of us.

OK...so we have some big picture thinking to do in preparation for calling our next minister and maybe we tie that thinking to our bi-centennial. But we also have some near term work to do on staffing, volunteerism and our financial challenges. Please, lean in every way you can...volunteering, "deep & soul impacting" pledging and warmly welcoming inactive members and every new face you see in

our sanctuary. There is no hierarchy nor outside resource to resolve our challenges nor decide our future, it's up to us...you, me and the people sitting next to you.

OK, I'm sorry that took so long but again, you need to know because the answers to these questions and challenges are going come from you.

So now I'd like to help us transition maybe from our heads to our hearts. How many of you are familiar with ee cummings? I learned to appreciate ee during an undergraduate poetry course and I'd like to share with you a poem I think appropriate for this moment...both in today's service but also in the life story of this church.

READ: "Let it go" by ee cummings

You see, Universalism was founded on the radical idea that God loves us all and salvation is universal. But as the scripture on the outside wall reminds us, it's more than just about our relationship with God, it's also about our relationship with each other. So let us calm our minds, let us "let it go" all of the frenzy...the to-do-list, let us "let it go"...the history of hurt feelings, disappointments and transgressions, let us "let it go" so we can move from our minds to our "Universalist" hearts and as ee says, "so comes love". So Claire and Julia are going to perform a song...listen to music, and let the lyrics from the song "For Good" from Wicked guide us so we open our hearts wide to those around us who, because you know them, you have changed for the better, you have changed for good...Claire/Julia

Sermon: The Universalist Experience (from the pulpit)

"You have left your handprint on my heart...because I know you, I've changed for better, I have changed for good." For those of you who know the Wicked story, this is a song of reconciliation, of the realization of the impact we have on each other's lives, for the better, for good ...it is a song from the heart, which raises us up to our essence, and in my view, what really matters in life, loving God by loving thy neighbor

As a faith community, this is the potential, the purpose, maybe even the promise that Olympia Brown charges us to "stand by" every time 2 or more of us are gathered. We come together for worship, we join in fellowship at coffee hour, in small groups and in our homes, we care for each other when tough times come, we

sing, act and cook together, we strive for greater social justice in the world, and we roll up our sleeves and do the work of the church as volunteers, making coffee, doing mailings, assisting with worship, taking meals to those in need of food and some TLC and I could keep going because there is much-much more that we do here on Fern St.

The point however, is not so much what we do with each other every day, week, or month, but how we are or how “we be” together and in those interactions, in those simple acknowledgements, the conversations and as Wallace Fiske put it, sometimes it’s simply “the touch of the hand...mine on yours”...it’s in those human to human connections, where “we” change for the better...we become better members of this congregation, our communities, our world. It is in these connections our hearts open up, we set aside the crazy pace and the issues in our lives, we become more fully human, we bring our best selves and in my personal theology, we open the door wide and invite the spirit to enter. We become more caring for those we know and those we don’t, we become less judgmental and more supportive and we become more generous in sharing our gifts and resources. So, I’ve never studied theology, never took a religion course, but, as a descendent of 150 years of Universalists...abolitionists, women’s suffrage, civil rights activists, this is my sense of universalism...reciprocating universal love with God and with those around us. It is the energy that helps re-center us to what is most important, re-energize our souls and re-commit to each other.

So if you’ll allow me, I’d like to try something...a bit of a reprise with a twist. For those of you who were here a year ago when I lead a service, you may recall my image of a fabric of interwoven threads that extend from each of our hearts to those around you in this sanctuary. Those threads make up a fabric that is uniquely us here on Fern St. We’re going to do a brief meditation with some mental imagery so please close your eyes, adjust yourself in to a good upright posture. Relax your mind...take a couple of breaths through your nose. Let go of the mind and focus on your heart, take another breath...can you feel your heart beating, can you sense it as the core of your energy, can you image your heart growing and opening, inviting the spirit to be with you?

Keep your eyes closed and now take a couple of deeper breaths and imagine a handful of threads...heart to heart...with some people sitting around you...feel their energy. Put your handprint on their heart and feel the presence of the spirit amongst you.

And now, I invite you to take a couple of very deep breaths, and imagine threads to all the people in this sanctuary and imagine all the threads in an interwoven fabric that is uniquely us with many colors and textures. Now take one more breath, our biggest breath, our collective invitation to the spirit to be among us and to hear our prayers. Breathe in the entire room and feel the energy, the commitment to this community...the love...can you feel it? This is our great purpose and promise...to support each other on our spiritual journeys, to care for each other and to live our faith in our daily lives...to open our hearts, to bring our best selves to journey the open road of traveling souls together...for the better, for good.

OK, go ahead and open your eyes. Take a few more breaths with me.

You see, when we open our hearts, we make room for the spirit. When we extend our hearts to others, we grow and change for the better. And when we lead with our hearts, I believe, the world around us will come along. So let us stand by this faith of the heart. Let us work towards a church that is ever more welcoming, relevant and vibrant by living the Universalist experience, living with our hearts wide open, heart to heart with the spirit by our side. When we listen to the language of the heart and we live our highest aspirations as a community of love, then I believe our challenges will fade and our direction will become clear.

Amen