

“Beyond the Walls: Unitarian Universalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”

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April 2, 2017

The authors of *Weird Church*, Beth Ann Estock and Paul Nixon, seem to be very certain of their claim that in 30 years or so, church as we know it will no longer exist. And their book is based on their analysis of many surveys and trends and data. I don't doubt that they're at least partially right. It doesn't take a genius to see that church and synagogue membership in this country is declining. In many parts of Europe, hardly anyone attends church anymore. We in the US seem to be following a similar path.

The *Weird Church* authors may not be correct on exactly how the future will look or the exact timing of the changes they forecast, but I do think they're right that we need to look at alternative models. Because here's the thing: we have a lot to offer to people.

People don't stay home from church or synagogue because they've stopped having spiritual needs.

Former UUA president Peter Morales believes that congregations will always be at the center of UUism. But he also says he is “realizing in a profound way that congregations cannot be the only way we connect with people.” And I think that this is absolutely true if we are going to survive and thrive.

As we've said, Unitarian Universalism has a lot to offer: true religious freedom, radical acceptance and a practical spirituality—a combination that's very hard to find anywhere else. As violence and hatred continue run rampant in this world, we are reminded every day of how important our message is. I feel a kind of urgency these days to get our message of radical love and compassion out there, and to spread our commitment to equal rights and justice. Do any of you feel that?

We as UUs have some challenges ahead of us, but we also have some opportunities. Consider these facts:

- For every adult member of a UU congregation, there are three non-members who say they are Unitarian Universalists.
- There are pockets of UUs all over the continent who are geographically isolated from a UU congregation.
- The majority of children raised as UUs don't join UU congregations when they are young adults. However, they still consider themselves Unitarian Universalists and share core UU values. Many of them have close friendships with other young adults raised UU whom they met at church or at a youth con.
- One out of four Americans says they're unaffiliated with any religion. Among young adults, that number is more like one out of three.

But again, just because they aren't attending a house of worship doesn't mean they don't have spiritual needs. Congregations as local parishes arose in a bygone era. Most members lived within a mile or two of their church. Churches were the center of life in a predominantly agricultural society. Even though our society has radically changed, we're still operating on the traditional congregational model where people come together to a central location and listen to the minister or other speaker deliver a religious message. Not that this model will become totally irrelevant. But we need to explore new models that go beyond this limited way of providing spiritual sustenance to people.

Any religious or spiritual alternative to the weekly service in a building, though, must offer something meaningful; it must help us grow spiritually and it must inspire us in the way we live our lives.

Sometimes, as we look to do things differently, we don't have to start from scratch. There are some things happening in Unitarian Universalism that we might be able to learn from. We can start by looking at what we're doing very well right now and do more of it. For example:

- Standing on the Side of Love is an initiative that has drawn together UUs and many who are not members of UU congregations, but they share our values of justice, equity and compassion.
- The Church of the Larger Fellowship is a non-traditional congregation that has served UUs and other interested people world-wide, mainly through

print media. It has recently enhanced its outreach, providing online worship services and new online offerings. It's another model for new ways of connecting.

- Of those who are preparing for the UU ministry, more and more are choosing a community ministry rather than parish ministry. They are striving to bring our principles of justice and compassion to the world through ministries to prisons, hospitals, the military and other organizations.
- We are linking up with other groups such as Black Lives Matter and working together based on shared values and goals.

How can we reach more of the people who share our principles and values? Peter Morales encourages us to re-think our concept of who we are. The full name of the UUA is the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. Well, the time is coming when we need to be broader than an association of congregations. Morales likes the term "religious movement" to describe us. Seeing ourselves more as a religious movement than a collection of congregations has significant implications for how we go about reaching out to others who share our values and principles. Imagine:

- We focus more on connection and less on "membership." Our priorities become who our ministry serves, how many lives we change and the difference we are making in the world rather than membership numbers.
- We offer new ways for the half a million people who call themselves UUs to connect to our movement, whether or not they choose to join a congregation.
- We find ways to inspire people who want to be part of our movement, but are not ready to join a congregation.
- We reach out to young adults, high school and college students, and those far from local congregations around the world who share our principles and values.
- We find effective ways to connect with more people of color.

Morales says that creating ways to engage people who are not members of our congregation is not a threat to congregations. I think we're already finding that to be true here at UUFP. We have a number of special interest groups meeting in

our space, and there's a fairly free flow between UUFP members being involved in those groups, and non-members becoming involved in some of the things we do. By lowering the walls between our congregation and the larger world, we are all enriched.

I think that in the future, we will still have some strong, vibrant congregations, but UUism as a whole will also offer a whole array of other ways to be connected. One of those ways will be through effective use of technology and the Internet. We could have a much larger presence on the Web and reach out to all those groups who identify with our message.

One thing that I've gotten more familiar with in the past couple of months is taking online classes via video conferencing rooms. Anyone with a computer that has video capability can connect to a group of people gathered for the same purpose. I can envision courses on spiritual topics as well as covenant groups, which are small groups designed to foster intimate connections and spiritual growth through discussion of a topic.

And the whole covenant group concept has a lot of possibilities, whether online or face-to-face. How about using Meetup as a way of connecting for example? The UU congregation in Vero Beach, Florida, has over half its members enrolled in covenant groups. The program's co-founder, Jen Sutton, comments, "No matter how interesting the discussion, the central purpose of our covenant group program is to foster intimacy, open communication, and service... Groups have spontaneously reached out to provide support for members in need [such as rides], for the congregation (property clean-up, potlucks) and for the community (participation in a soup kitchen). Skills such as active listening and not rushing to judgment are beginning to move out of small groups into the general congregation."

In High Plains, Colorado, the UU congregation already had a successful covenant group program in place. But then they heard about a way to combine small groups with an approach to social justice work and they decided to try it. Each Beloved Community group, as they're called, focuses on a particular social justice issue. A typical meeting begins with readings, personal sharings and a spiritual practice which take up the first hour. During the second hour, the group plans their social action events.

Member Karen Clemmensen says that this approach to social justice is a paradigm shift. “Rather than those of us outside the effects of some problem or issue we see in the world deciding how we want to help or just throwing money at a problem, building Beloved Community groups involves walking with those affected by the issue.

For example, a group (in Boulder) “companions” with three immigrant families. Clemmensen says, “They work with, not for, these families and report that this shift in focus has grown the spirit of each UU involved.”

There are many, many creative ideas that can work and are already working to help more people meet their spiritual needs and to bring more love and justice to the world. The point is to be open to new possibilities. And sometimes we just have to be willing to experiment.

UUFP is a remarkable community. In the five years I’ve served you, you have shown each other how creative, flexible and resilient you can be. We survived a financial crisis. We took a chance on an old, really hideous-looking building (some of you remember what it looked like; how ugly was it? REALLY UGLY.) and turned it into a beautiful gathering place. (And how does it look now? BEAUTIFUL!)

We are much more embracing of a whole range of theological diversity and personal histories than most congregations I know of—and we’re willing to stretch ourselves beyond our comfort zones. We show how much we care for and support each other and our surrounding community in ways that are quite moving. Hand knitting shawls that we give to members in need. Giving rides to doctors’ appointments. We interact with each other in ways that are healthy and serve to strengthen our connections. We’ve found ways to invite groups to share our space and welcomed them.

We act from our hearts. That’s what’s really special about us. Part of our success in the future will be due to our continuing some of the really special ways we reach out to others. I think we’ll not only survive, but we will continue to thrive. But we’ll probably also look a little bit different.

What do you think UUFP will look like in ten or 20 years? What do we need to do to prepare? Are there things we can be doing now?

If we need to think about alternatives to church as we know it, it might make sense to think about what we do here. Why do we exist? What do we provide? What needs are we fulfilling? Let's take a look at our Mission Statement. Could we pursue fulfilling our mission without relying mainly on services on Sunday mornings?

I invite you to reflect on these questions, because your input for our Long Range Planning. Please see a board member of me with your ideas.

As you know, this is the kickoff Sunday for our annual pledge drive. And I want to put it out there that I'm so excited about what this congregation is already doing and what I see as its potential that I'm raising my pledge. I doubled it last year, and I'm going to give more than that this year. I set up my bank account so a check is sent to UUFP automatically each month. That makes it easy.

You'll find pledge cards on your seats.

Working together, and with a little imagination, who knows what exciting possibilities may emerge?