

# What Kind of Fellowship Is This?

Rev. Deane Oliva ~ September 23, 2007

Have you ever stood on the brink? Caught between two possibilities, unsure of which option to choose. One is familiar, the other risky but potentially rewarding. How do you go forward? How do you choose?

The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Santa Cruz County has hovered at approximately 125 folks for many years. It is a stable plateau, the reason for which is not fully explained by either geography or demographics. Gaining more members will change the culture of the church from a pastoral, family oriented one in which everyone knows your name, to a larger more program oriented one, in which there are more opportunities and more systems in place. This is a liminal space..

What factors contribute to the size ceiling are not yet clear to me. Many voices say, “We want to grow.” However, since the numbers are healthily static, one questions the conscious and unconscious factors that surround these words. It is important to remember that a church cannot grow beyond the needs it meets. Growth for growth’s sake is inappropriate; but, growth in our ability to meet needs is a great goal.

To further muddy the pot, Rick Warren who wrote *The Purpose Driven Church* relates that “A church that has no interest at all in increasing its number of converts is, in essence, saying to the rest of the world, “You all can go to hell.”<sup>1</sup> Strong words! His meaning is a sort of “Ha, ha, I’ve got a secret. I know something you don’t know and I’m not going to tell.” If we truly believe that we have something to say, something that has wisdom, something that others should know about, something that can help to change the world, then would we not want to shout it, spread the word, have others join us and move toward change?

This makes sense to me. Every time I read the seven principles, I think about it. Let’s see, I affirm and promote the worth and dignity of every person. Yes, that’s my belief, but you don’t have to believe it if you don’t want to because I don’t want to push my beliefs on you. Yes, I don’t mind, really. NOT! Truth be told, NO! that’s not true! I believe this principle of worth and dignity in every person. I also want everyone to treat others with compassion, to feel comfortable figuring out what they believe and what is ethically important for their lives. I want everyone to have a say on matters which affect them and I believe that we are all one global community, enmeshed in an interdependent web of life. Yes! I not only affirm and promote these principles, I believe in their universality. I want as many others to identify these beliefs as their own as possible. So, if I diligently, visibly proclaim these beliefs, there will be some who say, “Yes, I too believe this. I am a Unitarian Universalist. I just didn’t know it. I want to join this community.”

So, this sermon is not about growth. It is about what is important to us.

James Reeb, is, unfortunately, best known for his martyrdom. For those of you unfamiliar with Rev. Reeb, he was a white Unitarian minister from Boston who was deeply committed to the nonviolent civil rights movement. In 1965 he answered the call of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. to come to Selma Alabama and march for civil rights

---

<sup>1</sup> Warren, Rick *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission*, 1995, p. 52.

of all people. While in Selma, Reverend Reeb was beaten to death by a group of white segregationists.

It is too bad that James Reeb is known by his death for his life was extraordinary as well. A reading of his biography is inspirational and well worth it. Here is a quote on his view of

“The Church:

... I do not see the church as being an end in itself. Religion is not a way of life removed from the structure of society; it is a specific stance or purpose within these structures. The vision of the good life we are able to grasp and give birth to in the church must be a vision we seek to impart to every man. I believe the church as a church must have a continuing interest in all aspects of the life of the community in which it exists, and that it should seek to develop means of influencing the life of the community in keeping with its judgment about what will serve the common good. This is a view of the mission of the church which is being increasingly recognized by many denominations. In this regard, I think it is important for a liberal church to work cooperatively with churches of other denominations in seeking social change in the community...”<sup>2</sup>

There are many ways to classify churches. For today’s talk I will use I will use the system of congregational cultures, developed by Roozen, McKinney and Carroll<sup>3</sup> who delineate four culture types: sanctuary, evangelical, civic, and activist.

Let’s examine them. First, Church as sanctuary, a holy place, a refuge. Does this characterize our Fellowship? Do we unconditionally welcome those in need?

A holy place. Take a moment, close your eyes, do you see this fellowship as a holy place? Does holy have a “God” attached to it? If not, what else might be there? Rev. Beth Miller uses different words. She describes church as transformational. What is transformative for each of us is that which calls us **out** of our complacency and **into** our very best selves, our divine selves, that part of us that deeply wants to offer itself in service to something higher than our immediate wants or needs. Is our Sunday service a place and a time for meaning making? Without a place where a person can go to doubt and question, to confront oneself, to search and research while always feeling loved and accepted, we lock ourselves on a treadmill of despair.

Transformation is ongoing. It takes study and discipline. Too many of us, I think, are so happy to find our Unitarian Universalist home that we risk becoming stagnant. I ask, Do you have a satisfying spiritual practice? Do you read something ethically valuable on a regular basis? Do you learn more about your faith tradition, search for new areas of growth, have theological discussions, relate your daily life to your spiritual self? Are you taking care of your divine self?

I invite you to contemplate this story: A woman enters a fabric store and asks for four yards of chiffon, stating that she wants to make a nighty. The puzzled clerk demurely asks, “Excuse me ma’am, but isn’t that a lot of chiffon for a nighty?” “Oh, no,” she replies with a smile. “My husband is a Unitarian Universalist. He likes the search as much as the prize.”

---

<sup>2</sup> Reeb, James The Church of the Larger Fellowship (CLF) News Bulletin, April 23 1965.

<sup>3</sup> Roozen, McKinney and Carroll *Varieties of Religious Presence*, 1984.

I ask you, are you still experiencing the joy of the search? What types of spiritual formation classes have you wished for or considered!

Do we strive to make this time holy for folks that are different from ourselves or do we limit our sanctuary to those who think like our majority. Is it okay to talk about God? To mention Allah? Or to pray to Jesus? Are pagans tolerated or affirmed or appreciated. How do we make our church a holy place?

A refuge....If he needed it, would we give George W Bush sanctuary here? A pedophile? A behavior problem? What is our custom? Rick Warren relates that two especially receptive and needy groups are people in tension and people in transition. If a church is serious about being a sanctuary, then it must be accepting and ready to work with people who have problems. It must have a Safety policy and a Behavioral Covenant. Do we? Do you know what they are?

A second church type is evangelical. How many of you are grimacing right now? I know of no word more scary to Unitarian Universalists than EVANGELICAL. What bad associations we have with this word. It is interesting that the first few dictionary definitions for evangelical describe a Christian sect that believes in the authority of the Bible and personal salvation. Yet, I would venture to guess that many of us equate evangelical with its latter meaning, "ardent or zealous, crusading enthusiasm," with emphasis on crusading, bringing images of evangelical Christians berating us, attempting to convert us to the truth of their beliefs. We are repelled by this approach and resent others who try to tell us the one true way to find God. That makes sense to me. Yet, are we also afraid to have ardent enthusiasm? Are we reprehensible if we take the offensive and say "I've got good news to share." Yes? No? Many of us might not label this fellowship as evangelical and that makes me sad. It makes me sad every time I hear, "Wow! I never knew you guys were here." It makes me sad every time I meet someone earnestly wrestling with religious assumptions that they reject, but feel like they have no place else to go. What would it take to make "evangelical" a positive term?

This seems a good place to mention the Bay Area Marketing Campaign. How many of you have heard or seen the UUA ads placed in the San Francisco Bay area for the past week? This campaign is an outreach to those who might be looking for us, for those who want to find meaning in their lives, for those who want to find a community of shared values. I ask you to consider the evangelical side of your faith and to brainstorm wildly what being evangelical could mean to you, your relationships, your life.

How many of you came to the yard sale last week? How did you feel when you saw the signs pointing to the church? Here we are! Here we are they screamed. On Sundays, let's put up those non permanent saw horses or some visual cue like we did for the yard sale that says, "Here we are! We are here!"

The third type is civic. Many UU churches are civic churches. They open their doors for forums and discussion groups, so that folks can study the issues of the day. They are politically conscious but sometimes not politically prophetic. Some are afraid of losing their tax exempt status. Others agree with Paul Razor. The job of liberal theology is for exploration and exposition; the job of liberation theology is action.<sup>4</sup> When a group is clear about their sub culture, they can be a powerful resource. For example, First Unitarian San Diego Peace and Democracy Action Group instituted a monthly forum on "Matters of Controversy" shortly after 9/11. Thus far they have hosted over 85 events

---

<sup>4</sup> Razor, Paul, *Faith Without Certainty*, 2007.

with 30-500 persons in attendance. Average attendance is 70. All proceeds go to the speaker's cause. Their email list, collected by tabling, has over 900 names and is used for announcing forums as well as community wide peace events, action alerts, issues and articles of interest. Peace and Action also sells bumper stickers, puts out literature and collaborates with outside groups. They are clear that their main focus is civic in nature.

Does our fellowship see itself as a civic culture? Does it gather and disseminate information about important topics? Does it hold open or closed discussions about issues of consequence? Does it invite experts to help educate its members?

The fourth culture is activist. These churches focus on making a difference through visibility and action. Many UU congregations think of themselves as activist. In truth there is an important distinction between those churches that do hands on work and those that support causes through giving money and signing petitions. When we look at churches which claim to be in this group, we must consider the ratio of action versus planning for action as well as the types of action taken. Just as the UUA General Assembly considers study action issues for several years and actions of immediate witness which are acutely important, does our congregation respond to long term needs only or are we available for actions which need an immediate response? What percent of our time is spent inwardly focused and what percent is outwardly focused? Is our time in committee meetings more or less that our time on the streets? I suggest that instead of joining more committees that members save their energy and commit to more actions. I also suggest consideration of having a Task-manager at Committee meetings. This person is not the recording secretary. The Task-manager only records who is responsible for each action decision made. Before the meeting adjourns, the Chair recognizes the Task-manager who reminds each person of the jobs which they have agreed to carry out between meetings and the list is then attached to the minutes.

These four congregational cultures are one layer of the character of the church. Each congregation develops a culture which works within its sense of mission. The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Santa Cruz, this fellowship, has the following mission statement:

***We, the members of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Santa Cruz County, join together to foster our spiritual growth and to promote social justice.***

***Honoring religious diversity and affirming the inherent worth and dignity of all people, we commit our combined actions and personal resources to these goals.***

I have to be honest with you: I admire this mission statement. It is succinct, easy to memorize, and actually makes specific statements. It is an important document if in fact it expresses the mission of this fellowship: spiritual growth, social justice and community. I think it does.

Mission lends direction to the congregation. If you know what you want to accomplish, you can focus your energy on establishing a vision of end goals. For example, at Saddlebrook Church the vision included having 20,000 members, each one with a significant ministry! Vision end goals should have a concrete quality, one that can be transformed into a strategic action plan. The strategic plan is a set of action steps designed to fulfill the vision, a product of the mission statement. I know that the five year long range plan at UUFSCC is up for review and revision right now. I hope that

each of you consider this task seriously and produce a document that is worth contributing time talent and treasure to accomplish.

Lastly, let us briefly consider the culture of change. Ed Friedman points out how relationships can become imaginatively gridlocked. The work of the church can become stagnant with people running in the same treadmill, thinking that if they would only try harder, do better homework or use another technique the results might be different. Gridlock occurs when we keep searching for answers rather than re-framing questions and when we dichotomize decisions into either/or paradigms.

All too often we look for new and better answers, running in chronic circles of redundant suggestions. To break the gridlock one must move away from the situation, brainstorm and obtain enough distance to change the questions being asked.

Friedman reminds us that change always results in resistance. And let's not forget that resistance is good. Resistance implies engagement. It is important to discern whether the resistance is rational or emotional because responding to emotional issues with intellectual arguments will be futile and may even make the situation worse. Likewise it is rarely helpful to respond emotionally to rationally driven resistance.

No one will dispute the fact that we are in a period of religious transition. Seekers who come to our churches have already researched us on the Internet, driven by, and made at least intellectual decisions about the fit. Unlike prior eras where the church was the center of most folks' community life, religion now struggles for a place not only in the hearts and minds of folks but also in their schedules. Two worker families are a necessity, not just a convenient way to afford the luxuries. Sunday mornings are no longer sacred; churches vie with school and community events all day long.

Warren reminds us that what most seekers are looking for is not truth, it is relief. They want love, acceptance, forgiveness meaning, self-expression, purpose, freedom from fear, guilt, worry, resentment, discouragement and loneliness.<sup>5</sup> Alice Mann further reminds us to consider the person's margin of life. The Margin of Life is the surplus energy folks have left after all the dos are done. Mann believes that the larger program church model by its very size and organization to enhance people's margin of life" more effectively than a smaller church. When considering expansion, she notes, every church has at least one moment of truth, a situation or decision that becomes a crucial test of the congregation's willingness to change size, e.g., perhaps a vote on expanding the parking lot, or adding a second service.<sup>6</sup> Our congregation it seems is set to embark on a moment of truth.

No, this sermon was not about growth, but about defining the character of the church. Throughout, however, examples were given of situations or attitudes which might lead to growth.

To answer the title question, What kind of fellowship is this? I believe that this fellowship has chosen to articulate three priorities: spirituality, social justice work and community. Their mission statement proclaims it. I can see the social justice side clearly and the focus on inner community is overwhelming.. The spiritual growth aspect is not as clear, an avenue to work on and yet a core soft spot. One congregant told me "Let's face it. I love the social opportunities here." When I asked her whether or not she would have the same social enthusiasm in work or school groups, she realized that no, there was

---

<sup>5</sup> Warren op. cit. pp 222-226.

<sup>6</sup> Mann, Alice *Raising the Roof* p. 43.

an underlying core of common values embedded in our social events. We are a religiously grounded group. There are times, unfortunately, when we forget that; sometimes, unfortunately, when we are engaged in provocative social justice work and do not acknowledge its religious base. Let us always remember that it is our core values, our ethical framework, which centers our justice work. We are a religiously grounded community.

I want to close with an anecdote from last week that you should know for it speaks volumes about the culture of this church.

Last week my closest friend, the Reverend Beth Ann Suggs, and her partner visited our Sunday Service. Beth Ann was in a Unity pulpit for 18 years and has visited many congregations as part of her ministerial mentoring career. After the service we went out to dinner. Out of the blue she remarked: “Deane, I just have to tell you that was the warmest, most welcoming congregation I have ever been to. I mean it. In some churches that I visit, no one speaks to me. In this one four or five folks came up and started up a conversation. And not only did they ask my name, they also told me their name, like it mattered to them. They actually told me their name too.”

May we always remember to be welcoming to the traveler, respectful of our uniqueness, and curiously engaged in our world.

May it be so.

#### SELECTED AND ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Edwin H Friedman’s posthumously published book *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix, a radical approach to leadership issues*. To tweak your memory, Friedman is the author of *Generation to Generation*, one of the most influential texts on family systems approach to organizational management.

William Chris Hobgood’s *Welcoming Resistance*, Alban Institute, 2001

Peter L Steinke’s *Healthy Congregations: A System’s Approach*  
A somewhat depressing popular seminary text.

Alice Mann’s *Raising the Roof: The Pastoral-to Program Size Transition*. The first part of the book presents concepts, research, strategies and practical tools. The second part is a step by step, exquisitely specific, outline of a process.

Rick Warren’s *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission*

A book that I highly recommend to each of you for thought provoking passages worthy of further discussion.