

State of the Congregation, 2016

sermon by Ken Jones, delivered January 3, 2016

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So I do this every once in a while: hearing, in the month of January, politicians of various orders delivering their annual “state of...” messages, from the President’s union all the way down to towns and school districts, I coronate myself, in a way, and deliver, in January, my own version of such grandiosity in the form of a “State of the Congregation.” Lucky you, all you who have yet to barely risk your New Year’s resolution to come to church more often and are here in this house of worship on the first Sunday in 2016.

Welcome to a brand new year.

I hadn’t planned on doing a “state of...” this year until very recently. But I’ve chosen to do so today, this January, primarily for two reasons. First, the somewhat selfish reason, is that I just this past fall completed five years as your half-time Minister, a milestone that has prompted some personal reflection on my part, and that can – and maybe should – prompt some collective reflection from all of us about what we’ve been doing together and what we might set our sights upon. Five years sometimes – maybe especially for parents – passes by like a blink of an eye.

The other reason I’ve decided to take on this topic today is because I truly believe that this congregation is at an historic moment – a crossroads, of sorts, and the time is perfect for some broader and deeper reflection on who we are, where we’re at, and where we’d like to go together not only in the coming year, but the next five, ten, or even fifty years. That’s what an historic moment means. The bottom line of this sermon today is this: I’m

recommending to our Board – to all of you, really – that this congregation engage, in 2016, a process of conversation and reflection on who we are and where we're going, culminating, hopefully, in a strategic planning process, guided by a professional facilitator. I think we are faced with some major questions right now that we need some underlying context on which to find answers.

So that's the essence of my state of the congregation, and if you're in agreement with me, then you probably don't need to listen any more. But I hope you do, for I think the questions I'm going to ask will themselves point to a need for such a context.

I want to start with one thing that is by no means the most important, but is on my mind this morning, and maybe some of yours as well: the operation of the Women's Winter Weather Emergency Shelter we host at UUCY. As most of you know, this is the third winter (not consecutively) we have hosted a women's shelter, plus we hosted a men's shelter for two years as well, meaning this is our fifth winter we opened our doors to provide warmth and shelter for some of the most vulnerable people in this community. Despite the coincidence with the timing, the shelter itself is not "my project" – it was not my idea originally, nor have I always advocated that we continue to host it. It is a project of this entire congregation, and you all should be proud that we have stepped forward to help very consistently over the last several years. My role in it is to help ensure that it runs as smoothly as possible, and is a successful project for this congregation and for the population we serve, so long as we continue to host it.

Many of you also know that this year there's been a change in the way the shelters are organized in Yakima. For the previous four winters, we pretty much "leased" our space to Sunrise Outreach, a social service agency affiliated with our neighbor Vineyard Church, that set up the contracts, got the approval, recruited and trained all the volunteers and staff, and pretty much ran everything. In other words, we played a mostly passive role. This arrangement, perhaps, worked well with our congregation, because the often expressed sentiment reflected the results of the survey our board did last summer: that we are glad to have the shelter here at UUCY, but most of us are not available to help out to make it happen.

This year, as many of you know, a different arrangement was made by the Homeless Network of Yakima County and the Yakima Valley Conference of Governments, which has taken over from Yakima County as the public agency overseeing homeless services. This year, Yakima Neighborhood Health Services holds the contract for the overall administration of the shelters – two men's and one women's – but they are operating them more in partnership with the churches rather than as an agency leasing space in each church. There is both opportunity and challenge in this approach – opportunity for the churches to have more control over how the shelters are run, and challenge in that the churches may find it harder to be "passive" agencies and may need to take a more active role in the shelter operations. I've been doing this this year, with a tremendous amount of help from our Office Manager, Genevieve Gonzales, and many others. But it is, indeed, a challenge, and perhaps more than we bargained for.

Many of you may also know that there are at least two other efforts underway in this community to help the homeless and provide shelter in a more proactive method. One effort is to establish a community housing “village” model, in which homeless individuals and families can live for a somewhat longer term in small, rudimentary cabins. The cabins will be located on a dedicated piece of land, and will be complemented by a common facility that includes things like kitchen space and laundry facilities, and will be managed, to a large extent, by the residents of the village. This is a model that has worked successfully in cities like Eugene, Oregon and Olympia, Washington. There’s a lot of good energy going into this project and it holds great promise to not only provide emergency shelter for homeless people, but a good place for them to transition from a homeless way of life to something more stable. It is a good project, but it is likely several years away from becoming operational.

Another initiative that many of you know about is Yakima Neighborhood Health’s own service center they are working to establish at an old market building at the corner of Walnut Avenue and South Sixth Street. Their plan is to create a multi-service outlet there, including an emergency shelter to help get people out from the weather and to stay alive. This, too, is an excellent proposal and holds promise to do much more for our most vulnerable citizens than to just keep them alive one more night. But even if they get through the legal challenges that have been made against this, it too is likely another year to two away from coming to fruition, and will be limited in the population it can serve.

What do these projects have to do with the questions that we, as a congregation, need to address? My belief – which I’ve heard echoed by

many who work with the homeless in this community – is that if and when these projects come to fruition and are successful, there will still be a need for additional shelter space during the winter months. There will still be a need for church-based shelters for the foreseeable future. I'm also hearing not only from service providers but from many of the homeless and formerly homeless in this community that UUCY is a particularly good place for a women's shelter. We've become known as the women's shelter in this town, and I'm sure there are many people hoping that we'll continue to open our doors for women as long as a place is needed.

So this begs the question that we should be thinking about now: what is our long-term commitment to hosting a women's winter weather shelter here at UUCY? Remember the definition of vocation that Frederic Buenecher offered: it's where our heart's greatest desire meets the world's greatest need. If it is in our hearts to continue to provide this ministry in our community, then there is definitely a need for it. Indeed, I've been undertaking the shelter work this winter with an eye toward the future, to see if it could be a successful ministry for this congregation. But I don't believe it can be successful, long term, if we play a primarily passive role. We'd have to make a commitment to make it a core part of our ministry for it to be so. And so that is the first question I'm proposing this morning.

But enough about that – for me to truly do a “state of the congregation” sermon, I want to focus on bigger – and perhaps deeper – questions of who we are and what we do as a faith community. Aside from the shelter, our major public service project this past year was a forum on race relations put together by our Board President, Randy Luvaas, together with the community group, Let's Talk. This attracted a sizeable audience,

as did our hosting of a talk sponsored by One America featuring Illinois Congressman Luis Guitierrez. Indeed, some in our community know UUCY primarily as a place where other things happen – which isn't a bad thing, I guess.

But what's really important is what we do here. Who are we? What do we do? Where are we going? These questions have been on lots of our minds, I'm sure, as we've gone through a process of "updating" our mission statement, and have considered changing our name. So I confess here to another reason for me choosing to deliver a state of the congregation sermon this morning – that I think both of these questions – our name and our mission – deserve a bit more reflection and community-wide engagement before we declare the matters settled. The new mission statement that we've come up with is, I think, an improvement over our previous one, and is quite serviceable as far as mission statements go. But the real work of the church cannot be found in one statement. Our work and our identity is too complex for that. So I'm not as interested in a mission "statement" as I am in our *mission*. Why are we here? What are our highest aspirations? How do we know when we're successful? On what basis do we make decisions affecting the life and future of the church, including – I'll add the elephant in the living room question – how committed are we to this facility? Is it time to envision a new home for us, and if we were to do so, what kind of home would we envision that would best match our mission?

To our potential name change I say something similar. I understand the urge to differentiate ourselves from other religious communities by getting rid of the word "church" – for it can be very frustrating to attempt to

differentiate yourself when people have pre-conceived associations with particular words. But I would urge us to think carefully, in part because no matter what name we choose, there is going to be a “quacks like a duck” association anyway. How many of you here are going to ask your friends “Hey, are you going to community this Sunday?” I think we are at a moment in time when considering a name change is the right thing to do, but I urge us to do so only after having some in-depth conversation with each other, people in the community, and maybe even people who have left this congregation, to find out what is burning at the center of who we are; what keeps us going and keep us together. That, I believe, will result in a much more fitting name than one designed to be non-offensive to the supposed multitudes that might want to join us but won’t because they are people who tend to not join “churches.” We should choose a name – if we change our name at all – based on who we strive to be, not what we think others want us to be.

This brings me to another thing I worked on with some of you this year, which I sincerely hope we work on more together. That is the development of a plan for growth. Some of us struggled with this these past two years, motivated by the realization that the Pacific Northwest Unitarian Universalists Chalice Lighters grant program requires congregations applying for grants to have a growth plan in place. Sounds easy enough, doesn’t it? Yet what I think we found as we engaged in the process are challenging questions about what kind of growth we hope to achieve, and how we might be able to do it. We came up with a few draft documents with wonderful language about more programs and wider audiences and more social justice etc. etc. But then the aforementioned

prophet of UU, Brother Luvaas, asked the important question: how? How are we going to do all this? Some days it seems like we have our hands full just keeping the boat afloat, ya know? And believe me, I know how hard many of you work to do just that, and we all owe you deep gratitude.

Well, this question of growth brings me to the personal reflection I alluded to after serving you as half-time Minister for the past five years. This is hard to quantify, but the thing that has become clear to me in this past year is that we have not grown in numbers or programs during my tenure here; in fact, we have shrunk. Yet growing the congregation is one of the challenges you guys put to me when you first hired me in the fall of 2010. So have I failed? Perhaps. Am I not the right Minister for this community? Perhaps. Or are there other challenges for growing our ministry that one half-time Minister simply can't accomplish? Again, perhaps. I have mainly questions for you today, questions that I think you all need to answer. Just about every growth consultant that I've listened to during my two decades in professional ministry has said that growth requires not only a commitment to a core mission, but also investments – investments in staff and resources. What are we willing to invest in?

Of course, the growth trend for the past five years has some history. From the way I see it, this congregation has been shrinking in people and programs for probably the last decade and a half or so. Probably ever since we purchased this building, or at least since we lost our last full-time Minister. At the time we purchased the building, we not only had a full-time Minister, but also a half-time Director of Religious Education, and a half (or better) time Administrator. Is there something we can learn from this history?

I hope you don't think I'm being negative by stating what I think is the obvious – that this congregation is shrinking, not growing. At least not growing in the traditional sense. We exist in a culture in which most mainline religious institutions have been shrinking for the last several decades, and a culture that seems to exhalt growth for growth's sake all too often. There is nothing wrong with being a small congregation, for small congregations often foster a sense of spiritual intimacy and community that goes well beyond what can be found in many larger congregations. The truth that I'm trying to hold up, and the "problem," if you will, that I'm trying to identify so we can address it is inconsistency. We have a rather large church building, but we are, in essence, a rather small congregation. A small congregation in a large church, is one way to put it. I think we can frame this larger conversation in terms of appreciative inquiry – for we can, and should, be grateful for what we have: a small but lively congregation of committed people who sincerely believe in the importance of Unitarian Universalism in this community. In other words – *you* are our greatest asset.

Questions about growth are always complex. I think it contradicts our values to look at growth of the church only in terms of numbers of people, programs, or dollars. What really matters is how do we affect the lives of people in this community? How well do we comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable? How many lives do we change for the better?

Those are incredibly hard questions to answer, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't be asking them. We live in a culture in which it is commonly said, at least in businesses I'm familiar with, that if you can't measure it, it doesn't exist. I don't think that's true in a religious community. Another

name for “religious community” is “spiritual community,” the kind of community that forms around common aspirations of spirit. And spirit, our theology and history suggest, cannot be named. At least not fully. But attention to spirit is vital – if we lose it, we risk losing the heart and soul of community.

In all this, the most important thing I’m going to ask you is not a question with an answer, but is about your commitment. I’m going to be proposing that we take part in an exploration of some of these questions, and to do so in a way that goes beyond one Sunday service or an article in the newsletter or even one congregational meeting. I think we need some sustained conversation, under the direction of an outside facilitator, that will take place in several forums over several weeks, with some process for capturing the essence of these conversations so the sentiments expressed can be compiled. I think part of this, too, will be a community gathering in which nearly everyone can participate, probably some Saturday in the coming months in which we can have time to process all the questions and begin to form a unifying strategy not only for growth of the congregation, but to better solidify what it is we are giving our energy to, and what our deepest desires are for where we can go together. (Unifire column, this Saturday.)

Rob Hardies at GA: best strategic plan ever was found in Emerson: soul, soul, and evermore soul. Let’s not forget that.



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