

## What is “Church?”

*Sermon by Rev. Ken Jones, delivered September 23, 2018  
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The oldest Protestant church in the city of Los Angeles, the First United Methodist Church of LA, holds its Sunday service in a parking lot. That’s right, a parking lot.

They actually put a tent up every Sunday, and set up chairs, altar table, candles, cross, Bible, and even their baptismal font to hold services in a parking lot the church owns.

It used to own much more. But back in the 1980’s, it sold its historic downtown building and used the proceeds to support affordable housing units in the city, create an endowed chair in Urban Ministry at nearby Claremont School of Theology, and launched the Urban Foundation, which focuses on helping first-generation Latino/a students gain access to college. Up until last year, First Methodist held their services in a multi-purpose room of an affordable housing complex, presumably one they helped establish with the sale of their property. That apparently served them well for a good couple of decades, for the price was right, I’m sure, and it was a regular reminder of their commitment to supporting affordable housing in a city that today has in excess of sixty thousand people living without homes. But they lacked visibility in this location – it had dwindled to just a few long-timers gathering for informal meetings without a Minister.

That is, until July of last year, when the Rev. Mandy Sloan McDow was appointed their Pastor (UMC clergy are assigned by their governing body, rather than each congregation choosing and supporting its own.) On

her very first Sunday there, noting how invisible the congregation was in the wider community, she asked everyone to pick up their chairs and other worship materials, and process outside to the parking lot in which she set up the tent. How's that for an introduction to your new Minister? They have been meeting in the parking lot ever since. Speaking of her bold move, she told *Christian Century* magazine, "I told them that the history of the church and its ministries, especially its commitment to providing housing, conveyed a powerful message, but no one was going to hear it if we stayed inside an obscure building."

After a little over a year, attendance at their services has grown significantly. In addition to their regulars, they get, curiously, a large segment of straight Filipino women, and a smaller but also significant segment of the queer community. And also a lot of homeless people, who may actually feel more at home in a tent in the parking lot than they would in a large church building. In fact, Rev. McDow says, some of the homeless people may be their most consistent attendees.

Most of you probably received recently a letter from our Board of Trustees, informing you of their decision that starting next week, we'll meet in a parking lot (not.) Seriously, the letter spoke about the conversations they and many others have been having about our future at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Yakima, and specifically about how much that future may or may not be tied to this facility in which we meet, in which we've been meeting for some twenty-five years, and purchased fifteen years ago thanks to many of you and others who contributed time and treasure to make it happen. The letter acknowledged that part of the reason to have this conversation now is necessity: can we afford the costs associated with

maintaining and keeping this facility? What are our alternatives? But there are also many other questions that are very important to talk about in contemplating these – why are we here? How does this facility help us with our mission? How does it hinder us? What *is* our mission, and what investments do we need to make to further that work?

These are all questions that we'll be discussing in the coming months – all of us. I ask us all to engage in these questions with an open mind and an open heart – that's what we Unitarian Universalists are so good at, right? Some of you may feel strongly that this facility doesn't meet our needs any more, and actually inhibits our work promoting liberal religion because of all the time and energy it takes to maintain it. There's evidence to support that view. For example, I did a little number-crunching myself and discovered that in our current operating budget approved by the congregation this past June, nearly sixty percent of our funds are dedicated to our facility and administration. Certainly some part of our budget needs to be dedicated to both of these, but as a religious professional I have to say that a congregation that dedicates the majority of its funds to things like this and much smaller amounts to actual programs is in trouble. We also need to consider that this facility – our largest asset – could, by an act of the great question mark in the sky, tomorrow turn into a tremendous liability, and we have precious other resources to take care of such a contingency. Let me tell you, no one in this room is more aware than I that if, say, our boiler fails next month then I might be out of a job.

On the other hand, you may be someone for whom this beautiful, historic downtown building symbolizes the very essence of what we're about as a religious community. You may feel, justifiably so, that this is an

historic treasure that, one way or another, has been bequeathed to us, and by continuing to use it we can maintain this landmark in downtown Yakima – rather than sell it to someone who may tear it down and put in a parking lot, to quote an old Joni Mitchell song. It's owned free and clear of debt, thanks to many generous souls some fifteen years ago, and it would be foolish, you might think, for us to squander this precious gift.

Maybe one of these two descriptions describes you; or maybe you're somewhere in between. Or maybe it's not something you've given a lot of thought to. In any case, I hope that we can all meet in that place Rumi described as the field beyond ideas of right doing and wrong doing, and open our minds to one another and to ideas of which we may not have thought before.

This is one reason why I started today with the story about First United Methodist in LA – what I see in their story is two profound defining moments for an historical congregation. The first profound moment was some three decades ago, when they made the brave decision to sell their building and use the proceeds to help their community. Then their more recent move out to the parking lot, which was done to increase their visibility and, whether they knew it or not, to reach out to new populations in their own community. They almost certainly would not have made this most recent move had it not been for the decision they made back in the eighties – a reminder that the decisions we make now may not fully play out for several decades. We may not know exactly what we'll do if we make a change; sometimes the act of faith is to take a bold step forward trusting that a new path will emerge at the right time. That time could be just a few weeks, or a few decades. The one thing we can be sure of is if we're

faithful to the spirit of this movement and to the visions of our ancestors, then we are acting in good faith. We are a community of faith, after all, surely we can act like one.

A few years ago, when I was fairly new as your Minister, I sort of accidentally blurted out in a conversation with one of our members that I was trying to change the culture of this congregation. Oops! That's not something a Minister should say, especially a fairly new one. The person seemed at least a little taken aback, but then calmly and politely asked what it was I was trying to change the congregation into. Of course I never directly answered that question, because that's not my question to answer – that's yours. What you want this congregation to be is up to you – my job is to help you get there.

What I really meant when I said that was not that I was going to choose how the Unitarian Universalist Church of Yakima would change and what it would change into, but more of an acknowledgement that as we live in an era in which institutions of all sorts – especially religious ones – are changing in fundamental ways, that we need to be ready to let go of some of our most cherished aspects of this congregation if we are going to adapt and survive into the future. I want to underscore that point now by saying this: the questions before us are not a simple “yes or no” kind of question; not simply do we sell this building or keep it? In fact, there are many different options we can and should think about, and as we engage in conversation and research about our options I believe many more will emerge. There are only two options that I believe should not be on the table: we cannot stay exactly as we are now, and we cannot go back to any particular idyllic past ten, fifteen, or twenty years ago. Our world is

changing, our community is changing, Unitarian Universalism is changing, and we are changing. We cannot go back to our favorite time in the past, even if we all miraculously agreed that the specific time we wanted to re-create was nailed down to, say, February 23, 1997. And I think we're at the point where if we simply try to stay exactly the same, we'll be in for a rude awakening. We simply cannot afford to keep this building and our current way of supporting it for much longer – we either need to find another home or seek out and bring in new streams of revenue and/or partnerships to support this facility the way it needs to be supported if it's going to be here in another fifty years. Or maybe even five years.

As an example of the kind of change I'm talking about, I want to share with you the essence of a training I went to last spring by Washington Nonprofits at the Central Washington Conference for the Greater Good. I find these trainings to be helpful, even though they are intended for traditional mission-driven nonprofits rather than churches. But we are also a nonprofit, and I believe that governing a church like this most closely resembles the paradigm used by nonprofit leadership – more so than for-profit business or government entities do, for examples. At the conference, presenters Jane Wei-Skillern and Marty Kooistra presented a framework for how nonprofits need to change to adapt to a changing world. They talked about four key leadership shifts that we need to make, which I think apply very well to us. They are:

*Mission, not organization.* To adapt, we need to think more about promoting our mission rather than our organization. The old assumption is that our mission is to just be here, to maintain this institution. But this paradigm shift suggests that we not look at the survival of our church as the

mission itself; nor is it our desired outcome. We have to look at our mission, how it is we change this community, both within and outside these walls. (Or whatever walls, if any, we find ourselves within.)

*Node, not hub.* This one, I think, is very relevant to us. When we went through our visioning process a couple years ago, there was much talk of UUCY being a “hub” of activity in Yakima. We envisioned ourselves, as we have long done, as being the “center” of liberal religion in the valley. That’s a fine thing for us to think about ourselves, but the world is changing, and I’m not sure that there is a need for a “hub” of activity here in the valley. What are needed these days are nodes, not hubs. A computer analogy is helpful here: “hubs” were like the old mainframe computers – a big central unit that was connected to many others; and those others connected to each other via their mutual connection to the hub. Nodes are more like the internet, which is disbursed and consists of thousands of points – nodes – which connect all users in a complex, almost organic-like structure; a web. I don’t think we’ll ever be the “center” of liberal religion or activity in Yakima, but we can, through partnerships and fluidity, be part of a vitally important network here.

*Humility, not brand.* This one, in my mind, is similar to the first one about mission, not organization. Our “brand” here at UUCY is Unitarian Universalism -- which, if you ask this UU Minister, is a pretty good brand. But it’s not the be-all end-all. It’s not “the solution,” nor should we pretend it is when we meet our neighbors and potential partners out in the streets. For us to be a vital player in this community, we need to be human beings first, flawed yet committed human beings who happen to gather in this particular place of worship for our spiritual sustenance. Most importantly,

we must do so embracing our tradition while not belittling the spiritual traditions of most of our neighbors – which in this town, is Christianity. Although the theological teachings of most strands of Christianity don't resonate with me, I stand in awe of the many people in the world and in this community that find within their tradition the courage to lead good lives and to love all our neighbors.

And lastly, they talked about *Trust, not control*. Trust, not control. Maybe we should translate that for a faith community as “faith, not outcomes.” That we have faith, or trust, that as long as we strive to stay on the right path, as we see it, then the outcome will take care of itself. This includes, importantly, trusting our neighbors and potential partners.

(Four points that require more.)

This last point brings me back to our building question. The urgency to make some decisions as to what kind – and where – of facilities we need was underscored at our last meeting of the Board of Trustees. As many of you know, last June when we adopted our budget, we took the Trustees advice and didn't budget any funds for the overnight security patrol that we have had here at the corner of Second St. and Lincoln Ave for most of the past two years. We decided to let it lapse, which it did, last July. Within a couple weeks of it lapsing, we began to experience quite a few people sleeping or otherwise hanging out in the various doorways and enclaves of our property – some of whom did so while also creating significant and unsanitary messes that our staff had to clean up on a regular basis. So even with a budget shortfall already upon us, our Board took the necessary step to reinstate the security patrol, which adds about \$250 per month to our maintenance expenses. The hope is we'll only have to have it for a



couple months, while we put up some fences enclosing the most popular “sleeping” areas on our property. I wish I had more confidence that a couple fences will take care of this problem completely. It is increasingly apparent that for the foreseeable future, this is a given for homes, churches, and businesses in downtown Yakima. There is a whole community of people who live in enclaves and on the streets, who are often chased from one place only to find temporary refuge in another. I think of this community as sort of an “underground” community in Yakima, sort of like an underground economy. We can ignore them, and we can chase them away, but for now, they’re not going to disappear. They are, in every sense, our neighbors too.

The way most of us look at it, I imagine, this building is our church home. We purchased it and have responsibility for its upkeep, and the right to feel safe and secure within it and on our property. That’s the way our private property system works. But I can also imagine that for some people in this underground community, for whom legal title to property is a far more abstract concept than finding a safe place to sleep tonight, they might see this building and property, like so many others in this neighborhood, as a fortress; a fortress designed to keep them off of this particular piece of land every day so that a few of us can come worship here a couple hours a week. This fortress sits mostly empty most of the time and yet is not available to our neighbors almost all the time, and only under strict control should we decide to let them in. This fortress, of course, has its soldiers in the war we are fighting, soldiers in the form of a private security patrol.

I don’t bring this up to belittle the problem, nor with any particular solution in mind as to what alternatives there are to fighting this war with

our underground community. But I bring it up because it is a part of who we are, in this present moment. We live – or more specifically, we worship – in a place in which magnificent Corinthian columns and a beautiful stained-glass ceiling separate us from the people sleeping outside on a piece of cardboard and relieving themselves in the nearby bushes. What is it we are called to do in this reality? Are we prepared to be in this place, amidst these troubling contradictions? Do we even deserve to be here?

Another way to look at it: some say that we purchased this building fifteen years ago in part because we felt called to preserve it. It's a beautiful piece of historic architecture and it may break some hearts to think about someone buying it to tearing it down for a parking lot. That's a powerful sentiment, to be sure, but another question is: what does this community need, right here, right now? What does this neighborhood need?

Rev. McDow, down in Los Angeles, says the idea is not for their church to meet in the parking lot forever. They stripped themselves down to the bare essentials and, to use their language, are placing their faith in God to show them what happens next. There is wisdom in this process, for often the most difficult thing to do when trying to envision or accept a new future is letting go of the present. I believe we need to do this in our minds at least. Maybe we need to envision ourselves out on the street, or in a tent, or by the side of a river – wherever it is we feel we can be most connected to the pain of our hurting world and the healing balm of a faith that every person has inherent worth and dignity and we are but a part of a vast interdependent web of all existence. Most mythical stories of

transformation, like the Phoenix rising from the ashes, teach us that this is how transformation happens – it starts with letting go.

(Water as analogy for congregation)



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