

What is “Church?” Redux

*Sermon by Rev. Ken Jones, delivered October 14, 2018
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“The story begins in a familiar way—a very large and aging church building with a very small and aging church membership.”

No, that’s not the opening of my sermon this morning, that’s the lead sentence from an article by the Rev. Seth Fisher in the *UU World* magazine last June, about a Unitarian Universalist congregation that reinvented itself.

I’ve often talked with people about Unitarian Universalism in a conversation that goes something like this:

People tell me that they don’t have any interest in church, and I say, “Our church is different. We don’t have a single doctrine. We think that there is some truth in all of the world’s faiths and philosophies and that people should be allowed to figure out for themselves what makes sense to them.”

They say something like, “Well, that’s what I think too.”

And I say, “We believe that everyone has inherent value and that we’re all connected. We should accept one another and encourage each other to grow.”

They say, “I totally agree!”

I say, “We come together as a community to support one another and live out our shared values.”

And they say, “That sounds awesome! Where do I sign up?!”

Then I say, “Great! Come to our big old building on Sunday morning to sing hymns and listen to a sermon.”

And they say, “Huh?” The look of excitement vanishes, immediately replaced with a look of disappointment because they had just become convinced that they had found something new and transformative to fill a very real need in their life, only to find that I was just talking about church after all.

The article went on to describe how this particular congregation made a shift, and began to promote their coffee hour as one of the main foci of their community. Coffee hour became an event itself, not just something to do after the service is ended. They included displays of art and live music, and got in the habit of inviting many of their friends, who might, like the above conversation suggests, not be enticed about joining a liberal religious community in which people gather to sing hymns and listen to sermons. Rev. Fisher reports that that worked, they started seeing many new faces at coffee hour. And the curious thing is, many of those who started coming to coffee hour wound up also joining them for services after a few weeks.

“We’re not in the business of getting people to sing hymns and listen to sermons. We’re in the business of transforming lives.” He says.

So how do we go about transforming lives?

In a similar vein, consider this email many of us recently received from the Unitarian Universalist Association, which began:

We know at least three things about the future of Unitarian Universalism:

1. *Organized religion is changing at breakneck speed as more people look for forms of spiritual community that better meet their needs for meaning, personal fulfillment and companionship.*

2. *Our Unitarian Universalist tradition and principles speak directly and powerfully to many of these people, even if our traditional ways of being in community do not.*

The third thing, I'll paraphrase here, is that many congregations are re-inventing themselves in significant ways. Is it time for us to do so?

Before I go much further, I want to step back to address the question I posed in the title to my sermon this morning – or should I call it a “presentation” since many of you probably don't come here to hear a “sermon” – the question being, “What is church?” I want to do this because, as many of you heard, a few weeks ago I also posed this question, but as I wrote my sermon (presentation) I veered far enough off that intention that I never addressed it.

So, what is “church?”

I've been thinking about this question partly because of the above articles. In fact, Rev. Fisher goes on in his UU World article to differentiate between “church” and *church*. He writes: “‘Church’ is candles and piano music and vestments and readings. *Church* is a community where people grow together and help each other create lives of meaning.”

But I've been thinking about this question long before reading these recent articles. In fact, a few years ago, we had a conversation here at UUCY about whether we should change our name, from the “Unitarian Universalist Church of Yakima” to something less Christian-specific, such

as the Unitarian Universalist *Congregation* or Yakima. It was an interesting conversation we had back then, but I never wound up engaging in it myself nor encouraging us to actually make a change. My feeling then – and now – is we shouldn't change our name solely as a marketing strategy, which is what I mostly heard from the advocates for change. The thought was that the name "Church" itself may be off-putting to people who may otherwise embrace our liberal spiritual community. I agree that that may be the case, but I think changing our name simply for external appearance could be counter-productive and distracting to more important work that we should be doing. That more important work has to do with looking deeply at ourselves and our congregation to understand what it is we actually *are* or at least what we strive to be and then choose what name describes us best.

I thought of this question again a couple months ago after a conversation at one of our Board of Trustee meetings here. The subject was the newly appointed ad hoc committee that is researching options for our facility needs. One of the people in the conversation said a few times, referring to the time about fifteen years ago when UUCY purchased this facility, that that was when we "bought the church." Some others seemed a bit confused by this nomenclature, suggesting instead that we say we "bought the building." The first person responded by saying that this building is, indeed, a "church," so it makes sense to talk about the time we bought the church.

That conversation brought back to me one of the thoughts I had in our earlier conversations about what to call ourselves. It seemed to me then, as it does now, that we can, if we wish, choose to call ourselves

something other than a “church,” but there’s a bit of a duck identity here. You know the phrase – “If it walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, etc.?” I find it hard to imagine that anyone who walks up those enormous front steps, past those foreboding columns, through those large wooden doors, and into this room with its pews and stained glass ceiling, will for long think they are entering anything other than a church, no matter what it says on our letterhead.

Is this a bad thing? Of course not. We are who we are, and if maintaining this facility is important to what we do together, then it seems that in that sense, anyway, we are a church. Some people object to the term “church” because it is etymologically associated with Christian communities, and many of us are not Christian in our thinking, and it’s fair to say that this community isn’t as a whole. But the irony is that is a very “Christian” way to proclaim ourselves not Christian – based on our beliefs. Among the religions of the world, Christianity is the one which more than most places faith – or belief – at the center of its identity. Christians define themselves based on their beliefs, just as we UUs often do. We do the opposite thing, often, by basing our identity on what we *don’t* believe rather than what we do, but in a way, it’s the same thing. I know many Jewish friends, for example, who practice their religion regularly yet profess they don’t believe in God. Yet they are Jewish not because of their beliefs, but because of their practice. (Hatem)

So we have, like Rev. Fisher’s congregation, a dilemma. Like his, we too maintain many traditions associated with Christian churches – we worship for an hour on Sunday mornings, sing hymns, listen to some type of sermon or presentation or message or whatever you call it; and we do all

this in a facility that is very much a “church.” On the other hand, it seems to me that we strive to be something other than a church, at least in the traditional sense. Like the email from the UUA said, we aim to reach new generations of unchurched people, but are puzzled by how to do that within the trappings of a traditional church community.

As our storyteller this morning might say, are we a fish? Or are we a frog? Or are we a fish that strives to be a frog?

As I hope you’ve heard, our Committee on Shared Ministry – (CF, SK, ES, & Me) will be holding the first of several conversations this coming Saturday morning open to you all to hear your thoughts on our Shared Ministry and how this facility either helps or hinders us in achieving our mission. The focus of this initial conversation will revolve around the four elements of ministry we defined in our visioning process a couple years ago: community, spirituality, justice, and learning. These four elements are what emerged very strongly after summarizing the many conversations we had with each other. I think they do describe what it is we – we who are here and are participating in this community – find valuable about it. That’s good information to have as we contemplate what we want for our future.

But information that we all share is only part of the story. The question is, if we really want to reach that new generation of seekers who are not drawn to traditional religious community, what might we be missing? What is it that people who are not here yearning for? Are we like the fish imagining the world outside to be more like us than they are?

To answer this question, I turn to outside sources, meaning coming from people outside this community. One such source that I’ve found interesting is a recent study by Harvard Divinity School called [How We](#)

[Gather](#). In it, seminarians and teachers looked at all sorts of institutions and groups reaching out to and connecting with traditionally unchurched people – everything from traditional churches trying to reinvent themselves to informal affinity groups and yoga classes and everything in between. They found many ways that people are seeking and finding connection to community outside of traditional religion, and they, like us, categorized the various aspects of the yearnings they heard, only in their case they came up with six categories instead of four. They are: community (same as us,) personal transformation, social transformation, purpose finding, creativity, and accountability.

There are some similarities here, which is interesting. The most obvious being both our visioning process and the Harvard study identified community as one of the core yearnings people have today. Also, I'd bet their category of "social transformation" pretty much aligns with our core value of "justice." I'd also venture to say that two of their categories – personal transformation and purpose finding – are very similar to what we call spirituality. Those are interesting and helpful parallels between their study and our own visioning. But what I find even more interesting – and what I want to spend a couple minutes exploring – are the differences. After pairing up the above similarities, we're left with a few orphans: one of ours and two of theirs.

On our side, we have the value of learning. There is no direct or obvious match to that in the Harvard study, though you could argue that both personal transformation and purpose finding might also be paired with learning. Perhaps. But it could also be that, for the new generation of seekers that the Harvard researchers talked to, learning is simply not

something for which they seek out a spiritual community or connections. It could reveal a long-held stereotype about Unitarian Universalists, that we are indeed kind of “heady” people. We like to think, we intellectualize. And we appreciate in our religious community the opportunity to do that together. But maybe we should consider that even though we value “learning” a lot that new generations of unchurched people might not be drawn to that as much as we have been. If this is true, it certainly has implications for our Religious Education program, but I also think it might reveal something about the form of our main worship experience. We tend to put a large amount of emphasis on the intellectual content of our worship service, maybe at the expense of more basic elements such as ritual and communion. We often ask one another something like “What is happening at church today?” to which another might reply “Oh, Ken’s going to talk about ‘What is Church’ or something.” How often do we reply with something like “We’re going to gather as a community, sing songs, share our joys and sorrows, meditate or pray together, join hands and engage in a social time together.” True, on days like today, when we have an particularly talented musician like Alistair with us, we might also emphasize that aspect of our service, but usually we put most of the emphasis on the intellectual content of our Sunday service – the words more than the music, if you will. This is one reason why I have curtailed the descriptions I put in our newsletter for my sermons, and why I have advocated for our First Sunday breakfasts to be emphasized as a time for gathering and sharing, not so much for whatever theme we happen to present. I suspect that in today’s online world, where there is a universe of information available at people’s fingertips, “learning” might not be something that piques people’s interest the way it once did.

Then there are two values from the Harvard study that don't appear in ours – creativity and accountability. I can imagine that “accountability” can actually be lumped together with “community,” for I think what people are looking for is accountability within community – a chance for us to hold up our own lives, thoughts, and actions in a mirror in a way that we're prompted to analyze the various aspects of our lives as others see us. Maybe this is an aspect of community that we don't stress enough – that it is not all just friends and good times, but is the place in which we are not lone actors and can't always justify whatever it is we are doing in the moment like we can when we're alone. This is implied in the work of our Healthy Relations Covenant – that we're not here to simply be whoever we want to be, even though we accept people for who they are – but are also here to strive to live up to high expectations of ourselves as social creatures. As I've said regarding our Covenant, the important work is not simply reminding ourselves of what we strive to be, but working in community to hold each other accountable.

Then that leaves creativity as the one other value from the Harvard study that we didn't list on our own. There are certainly aspects of this community that involve creativity – such as for those of you who strive to create presentations or poetry that might be the focus of a Sunday service or some other program. But I wonder what it might look like if we truly strove to make creativity one of our core values – through music, art, dance, theater, storytelling, or any other creative pursuit that people can explore in a supportive religious community. Is this something that all those strange creatures on land are yearning for?

As I often say, I don't stand up here in this pulpit with answers, mostly just questions. Just like many of you, I suppose. I don't know what the future of religious communities in this country looks like any more than you do, nor do I know what our future looks like at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Yakima. But I stand up here with a sense of awe and wonder – awe at what mysteries await us around the next corner, and wonder at how we'll respond to them.

As most of you know, last month I started serving our nearest UU neighbor congregation, the Kittitas Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Ellensburg, as a one-quarter time Minister. This dovetails nicely with my work here – I lead worship here usually two Sundays a month, and now I'm up there usually one Sunday a month. To try to initiate some consistency, I'm usually going to be up there on the first Sunday, when we do our community breakfast here. One of the exciting things I look forward to in working with both congregations, are the opportunities that may come up for us to work together. As I did talk about last time I attempted to pontificate on the question "What is Church?," I believe it is increasingly important for organizations such as ours to develop partnerships, to work more in networks than as stand-alone entities. That's a trend in our world that has little to do with our actual mission here at UUCY, but I think it is also consistent with our mission and principles to learn to work together in the interdependent webs in which we find ourselves. So in the coming months, I'm going to be raising up opportunities for our two neighboring congregations to work together, learn from each other, and perhaps even gather together from time to time.

I think there's great promise in this, in that these two congregations I serve have a lot in common. We're both relatively small and cannot afford all the staff support we'd like, including a full-time Minister. We're both relatively isolated, particularly from the greater UU world, in that we are based in somewhat small, conservative rural communities. And, of course, we're both Unitarian Universalist Congregations, which might imply that we have some common purposes in this world.

But there are also some ways these two congregations differ mightily: They are a significantly younger congregation, both institutionally and demographically, and as such have a fairly large and active program for kids. (OWL) They don't own a building like we do, but are the beneficiaries of a surprisingly good rental deal in which they are the main stewards of a facility that meets their needs – except they have the opposite problem of not enough physical space for all their programs, rather than ours of working hard to try to utilize the space we have. I'm sure if we could just ship them a few of our extra rooms, they'd be most appreciative. But one of the most striking differences to me is in our respective staffing choices. Their paid staff is limited to the ¼ time Minister, and part-time Director of Religious Education and Music Director, as well as some very part-time childcare providers. They have no administrative, maintenance, or facility staff whatsoever – all these tasks are handled by volunteers. Contrast that with what I talked about a few weeks ago, in which we devote some sixty percent of our budget to administrative and facility needs. I don't raise this because I think they're doing it right and we're doing it wrong – I raise it just because I think it tells us something about who we are. I have some concerns about their staffing priorities, and intend to address that with them

at some point in the future. But I also think we might gain some insight in learning and understanding how it is they manage a similar sized congregation in such a seemingly organic way. It is clear that they put the bulk of their paid staff into programmatic positions, something we may want to consider.

It all comes back to that question: who are we? Or, what are we? I know we have many answers to those questions, answers that, for many of us, remain unchanged over the years or decades we've been a part of UUCY. And when we look around our immediate environment and see the familiar faces and places, we often see the same identity, the same needs, the same desires that we've always had. That's all good, for it is important to remind ourselves of what brings each of us here.

But to look to a new and different future, we sometimes have to look outside of our immediate environment; we might look at other congregations, other organizations, other spiritual communities, in order to see new possibilities for our future. As you've heard, our Committee on Shared Ministry is holding the first of several conversations this coming Saturday morning at 9 am, right here in the basement of this beautiful building, conversations about our future and how we might best engage the work of "housing our ministry" in the decades to come. I encourage you all to take part in these conversations and bring your ideas and passions to them. But most of all I encourage you to be open to seeing new things, new models, new and perhaps different ways of being in spiritual community. I do believe there are generations of seekers out there that we can and should connect with; together we'll figure out how.



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