

Message Nov. 7, 2021

Reflection/Call to Community:

Cherish your doubts, for doubt is the attendant of truth.

Let no one fear for the truth, that doubt may consume it; for doubt is a testing of belief.

The truth stands boldly and unafraid; it is not shaken by the testing.

For truth, if it be truth, arises from each testing stronger and more secure.

--- Robert T. Weston – UU minister

UU Highlights — General to Local, Past to Present

Today I want to present a brief summary, as I see it, of the history of UUCY, and how it relates to the history of our parent organization, the national UU Association – and, based on that history, make some predictions of what the future of our community will look like.

The story begins 65 years ago, in 1956. Now I have only been attending UUCY events since 1994, so my knowledge of events before then is strictly second hand. And our church archives, sadly, mostly contain factual material – names, dates, budget figures, membership rosters and so forth – which do not convey a sense of what was actually going on. Fortunately,

our minister in 1986, Lex Crane, wrote a sermon to commemorate the church's 30th anniversary in which he provided a history, and Linda King, bless her, saved a copy of the text.

It all began when the Herald-Republic decided to run a feature on the religion page titled "This We Believe..." Most of Yakima's large churches responded as you would expect, emphasizing Christian dogma in their articles. But one individual submitted an article titled "This I Believe" – in which he emphasized freedom of thought as a core belief. His name was Don Northrop, and he had recently moved to Yakima, but he had been one of the founders of what is now the Eastside UU Church in Bellevue. Here's what he said in the article: I used the word "I" rather than "we" because no one is in a position to tell you what Unitarians believe. The very basis of Unitarianism is freedom, not for the sake of freedom, but in order to search for the truth."

Northrop's article struck a responsive chord in a number of people in town, so they contacted him, set up a meeting, and decided to form a Unitarian fellowship. Seven people, all told, who we now refer to as our charter members.

One of the first things they did was adopt a Statement of Purpose, sort of a predecessor to the Seven Principles in the UUA covenant. It included the

drawing of wisdom from all churches and cultures, respecting individual conscience and upholding freedom, amity and equal rights for all the world's people – and it also included this: “To hold our purpose open, that we may be free to grow with our living religion.”

The group became a Fellowship in the American Unitarian Association (later the UUA after the 1961 merger), continued to grow, and changed its status from fellowship to church in 1965.

But, as is to be expected in an organization built upon the idea of freedom of thought, there were conflicts.

The first of these to threaten the church's existence was ostensibly the Vietnam War. Apparently, in 1967, the church was split nearly 50/50 between those who thought the US should be fighting this war, and those who thought it to be clearly immoral to do so. As a result, the minister resigned, taking a position elsewhere, a large number of members resigned and the budget shrank.

Eventually, of course, the war ended, and the church moved on. However, I believe a close reading of members' comments, as related by Lex, shows that the divide went a little deeper than the war itself – many older members of the church felt that the church had been taken over by newer members whose primary focus was social action – as opposed to those who were more

interested in what they called “the deeper meanings of life.”

As I hope to make clear, this is a conflict that keeps reappearing, both in UUCY and the UUA at large.

The other major conflict that I know of in UUCY’s history resulted from a different problem – a lack of anticipated growth in membership, and its effect on the budget. In the 1990’s, subsequent to Greta Crosby’s retirement from the ministry, we went through a process to find another full time minister. This resulted in calling Chip Wright. At the time we were renting space at 225 N 2nd Street, home of the Congregationalist Church. In 1999 they decided to sell the building. After much discussion, we decided to buy it. There was some concern voiced about whether we could afford both a full time minister and the expense of owning a building, but most members were optimistic that our income would grow as we enlisted new members. This did not happen. The upshot was that efforts were made to reduce Chip’s salary, and he decided to accept a position elsewhere. There was a lot of hard feeling about this, which lasted for years.

So, to summarize, the main conflicts we’ve experienced were related to 1: different opinions on what should be the focus of the church, and 2: lack of membership growth.

As it turns out, both of these factors have been central to the conflicts that

UUA has experienced and continues to experience. In particular, let's consider the current effort to diversify UU membership.

I don't think it would surprise anyone here to learn that UUs are a very white group of people. People of color account for 40% of the US population, but only about 5% of UUs. Also, like most liberal religions, Unitarian Universalism is seeing a steady decline in membership. The UUA decided a few years ago that one way, maybe the best way, to reverse this trend is to make the UU church more attractive to POCs. To this end, the governing board committed to a program of setting hiring targets to achieve a level of 40% POC in all employment categories: ministers, music directors, RE directors, and the staff in Boston and the district/regional offices. As I said before, POCs do account for about 40% of the US population -- but only about 5% of UUs.

One of the results of this particular form of affirmative action has been what could be called the radicalization of UUA decision makers – they reflect the opinions that are currently fashionable among many leftwingers in academia, such as that the potential psychological harm caused by hateful speech is more important than free speech itself; that the Humanist commitment to “logic” and “reason” over all other forms of knowing is one of the foundational stones of white supremacy culture, and Critical Race

Theory itself, just to name a few examples. (Aside – what is CRT.)

As you would expect, there has been a lot of resistance – perhaps best illustrated by the Todd Eklof affair.

The 2019 General Assembly, the last to be held in person due to the pandemic, was held in Spokane. Eklof was (and still is) the minister of the UU Church of Spokane, which has about 400 members. He self-published a book, provocatively titled “The Gadfly Papers: Three Inconvenient Essays by One Pesky Minister”, in which he argued against the direction UUA was being taken. He proceeded to set up a table outside the GA meeting room and give away copies of his book. The UUA was not pleased, and he and his books were forceably removed from the hall. A month later, his ministerial credentials were revoked by the UUA Ministerial Fellowship Committee. Although 400 members remain in the Spokane church, and presumably support Rev. Eklof, about 50 members left UUC Spokane and formed a new church. (By the way, just as an aside, the new church is neither a Church nor a Fellowship, but is named “The Inland Northwest UU Community.”) Interestingly, one former member describes her disillusionment with Eklof this way: He wasn’t open to input regarding the shift in his sermons, which she said have become more academic and philosophical and less spiritual, and push for the church to be more active in

social justice issues. Sound a little like the Vietnam War split in Yakima?

And, of course, this conflict is still raging.

So what lessons can we draw from all this? As I said before, the same big issues are confronting us now: 1. How will we attract new members? And 2. What will be the focus of our community?

I believe that we, as a community, need to reach consensus on these issues before we can talk about hiring a minister or buying a new building. You may disagree – and I’d love to hear what you think. After all, our original statement of purpose included the following:

“To respect in each other and in all the authority of the individual conscience...” and: “To hold our purpose open, that we may be free to grow...”

Thanks for listening.

Bill Jacobs