

First Unitarian Church

May 7, 2017

What a week! Thirteen candidating events involving 175 people. I have met with our branch congregations, financial teams, long time members, Standing Committees, justice groups, families, new members, Sunday volunteers, young adults, the whole staff, and one pensive two year old who came by to visit me during open office hours. We read a story about Thomas the Tank Engine.

It has been a week of rich conversations. I am touched by your passion for this place and your commitment to it. I am humbled by the wisdom and experience you bring to it. I love hearing your hopes and dreams. I love to think seriously with you, and to laugh with you.

Over 400 of you also participated in the Search Committee's survey about what you seek in your next Senior Minister and what matters to you in this place. From that the Committee compiled a 105 page Congregational Record, which they shared with me and with you- you can find it on the church website. And the committee also shared with me 136 pages of your anonymous answers to open ended questions.

Now I'm here to tell you what the search committee and I have heard you say, and about my hopes and vision for us.

Let's see, 400 survey respondents, 175 conversations, and I have.... 20 minutes. So... no problem. (ha ha). As long as we all agree that this is a twenty minute sermon about beautiful things that we will experience and do together, hopefully for the next twenty *years*. And in the course of our years, we will dive into it more deeply together.

First, let me say that as I read through the survey and open-ended questions, I thought if they were a job description, no one in their right mind would take the job. Obviously, with so many voices chiming in, there are some conflicting hopes.

This is natural in any congregation. There's even a spoof out there about the conflicting expectations of ministers. It goes like this:

The perfect UU minister is a young energetic person with a maturity beyond his years.

Her sermons are thoroughly researched, intellectual, down to earth and touch her congregants' hearts.

He condemns injustice but never offends anyone.

She writes sermons all day and takes care of maintenance chores on her lunch break.

She makes \$400 a week, always looks professional, drives a decent car and pledges generously to the church. And to National Public Radio.

He is 28 years old and has 30 years of experience.

She is a humanistic theist, with Buddhist and pagan influences.

On his day off, he meets with every committee and publishes the newsletter.

She makes 15 pastoral calls a day in hospitals and homes, takes leadership roles in the denomination, meets weekly with the local interfaith group and is always available in the church office.

He is more about actions than words, but responds to every email.

Well, the results of our survey were not *that* conflicted. But you get the point. We each bring our own hopes and expectations for what our minister—and also our church— will be for us.

You want a Senior Minister who is educated, intelligent, and warm. You appreciate well researched, inspiring, thought provoking sermons. You want our congregation to be visible and welcoming.

You want to deepen your sense of community as a congregation, and you hope the next Senior Minister will help the congregation grow in diversity. You want her to have personal integrity and to be a leader not just in our church but also in the wider community, especially in matters of justice.

I am honored to be considered for this role.

There were a few tensions expressed through the survey. One person specifically wanted a male senior minister, and I'm afraid I can't help with that. But another person said the senior minister should be just under 5 feet tall, and I can guarantee I will always be that. Sometimes it's wisest to avoid saying "always" or "never." But on those two points, I am sure.

You also want your next Senior Minister to have a good sense of humor, to be funny ha-ha not funny weird. I'll let you be the judge of that.

You want the minister to lead great Sunday services here in the sanctuary, and you want her to visit the youth group, mid-high, and younger kids' religious education classes—which also happen at the same time on Sundays. Well, that's actually doable—I love to visit RE classes on those occasional Sundays when I don't have sanctuary duties.

Within this congregation, many of us find inspiration in a variety of the worlds religious traditions. This is a unique and beautiful thing about Unitarian Universalism. We draw from many sources as we explore our spiritual journeys together. But, as the Congregational Record notes, "some responses to the open ended questions demonstrated direct tension between desires for more and less inclusion of specific traditions" (22).

One area of tension was particularly sticky. In this congregation there is a widely shared desire to take a congregational stand on social justice issues, *and* there are people who don't want us to be so "political," and as a group, we value of political diversity.

How is a minister to proceed?

In *The Prophetic Imperative*, Richard Gilbert offers a parable about a congregation in conflict.¹ He writes:

An old Jewish story tells of a synagogue that had been without a rabbi for some twenty years and was now on the verge of being torn apart by arguments about how to do some of the central prayer rituals.

Finally, out of desperation, they sent a delegation to the old rabbi, long retired, to inquire what the tradition really was supposed to be. Each side presented its case, denouncing the other side for distorting the true tradition.

After they had concluded, the rabbi asked if it was true that each side was sure that its way was right. "Yes," both sides responded. "And both sides seem to think that the other side is deeply mistaken and is about to ruin everything should their view prevail?" asked the rabbi.

"Yes," both sides responded... "So what is the tradition?"

The rabbi had no problem: "The state of affairs you describe in our synagogue—*That is the tradition.*"

We are a religiously liberal congregation, with progressive social values. We are part of a denomination that has taken stands in support of the environment, abortion, Native American rights, and economic justice. Our denomination has dedicated itself to climate action, dismantling racism, and has called for an end to mass incarceration from the war on drugs.

Now, a majority of UUs identify as political liberals, and we tend to think of these concerns as aligning with progressive *political* platforms. And yet... as politically conservative UUs have noted, two people can disagree about the role of government, while sharing concern about climate change.

Although the political right has become conflated with the religious right in our country—and one of these days I'm going to preach on how that happened—the truth is a person can favor conservative political solutions to address socially progressive values.

In other words, UU's should be cautious about defaulting to politically liberal policy solutions for the matters that concern us, or especially judging those who don't. Since we want to be a place where values are shared but differing viewpoints are welcomed, we'll want to be careful not to conflate the two.

If you call me as your Senior Minister today, I promise to continue to preach the truth as I understand it, including what I see in our wider society. I will name what I see that uplifts

human dignity, equality, and the common good, what honors the earth and its creatures... and I will speak out about trends, policies, and events that cause suffering, perpetuate inequality, or do violence to our relationship with the planet.

But as I do, as I preach the truth in love the best I know how, I will also seek continually to deepen and grow in my own understanding. I will lead us in remembering that the mission of this congregation transcends contemporary political arrangements. Regardless of what federal law allows or disallows about religious institutions and politics—even if the laws are loosened—I do not believe it is the role of the church to endorse any particular candidate or party. I will tell you to vote, but I will not tell you who to vote for.

It is important to me that we leave the doors open to anyone, from any party or any religion, who wants to engage in thoughtful conversation or who wants to roll up their sleeves and work to further a compassionate and equitable world.

Of course, that means we are signing ourselves up for some challenging relationships. We UU's often share the adage, "We need not think alike to love alike." But it's not easy, is it!

In 1981, the civil rights activist Bernice Johnson Reagon delivered a speech at the West Coast Women's Music Festival in which she talked about the tension of community.ⁱⁱ She pointed out that for many thousands of years, humans lived mostly in distinct villages, where everyone belonged to the same culture. Then, technology changed everything, and connected the whole world. She said this in 1981. In 1981, a *microcomputer* was a computer that could fit on a desk, rather than taking up a whole room. Forget about the internet.

Technology like airplanes and telephones had changed things by bringing people together across difference. She said, "We've pretty much come to the end of a time when you can have a space that is "yours only"—just for the people you want to be there."

She noted that people do still try to create homogeneous spaces, like a space for "women only." (Remember, she was speaking at a women's festival). For people who are oppressed or marginalized, the purpose of those homogeneous spaces is to create safety, a place to shore up and be ready to go another day or week or month, or even to plan to change society. There is value in it; it's where you go to be fed.

But you can't stay in that safe space forever, Reagon says. Identity is multilayered. Just when you think you've got your homogeneous group, you are forced to confront the difficulty of defining such a thing. Will black women be welcome in the "women only" space?

Reagon is black, and had witnessed racism in the women's movement. How about trans women? Now within the category of "women" there are other distinct identities—it's no longer totally homogeneous, if it ever really was. How will diversity change things? Will the original group who envisioned it still have the experience of safety and solidarity they were hoping for?

Reagon calls homogeneous space “home space,” meaning the people there are like you, and she calls the space where we have to navigate difference “coalition space.” Coalition work—connecting and working together across difference—is uncomfortable.

In home space, she says, you feel safe. You don’t have to censor yourself, or explain your assumptions. No one challenges them, because they share them.

Coalition, on the other hand, is constant work. You have to pour energy into it. It is demanding, because it takes us out of our comfort zones. Reagon calls coalition a “monster” that never gets enough. It always wants more diversity, change and learning, more breaking down barriers, more challenge and confrontation and self growth and reconciliation.

Where does our congregation fit into this? Is this a home space? Or coalition space?

We come here to be spiritually fed, comforted, and strengthened. And yet we aim to engage and embrace diversity—theological, political, socioeconomic, cultural, and racial diversity.

Will we feel safe and comfortable, or will we be diverse and deal with the challenges that presents?

I’ll tell you what I think. I think Reagon uses a rhetorical dichotomy about home versus discomfort to make an important point in her speech, but it does not apply perfectly to the real world. It’s only an approximation. The home she talks about, the one that is synonymous with total comfort, does not really exist. Reagon even acknowledges how fleeting it is, when she talks about those layered identities wanting to come in.

In my nuclear family and extended family, which together constitute many homes in my life, we have blue-collar workers and people with doctoral degrees. There is someone who landed a scholarship to graduate school at Harvard and someone else— my grandfather, a teacher to me—who only completed eight grade.

There are liberals and conservatives, men and women. There are people society calls “brown,” and people society calls “white.” There are Christians, UU’s, un-churched people, and at least one person has converted to Islam. There are two languages and the cultures of two countries.

In my life, no home has been a place of 100% comfort. It has always also been a space of navigating differences and power disparities and sometimes-conflicting needs.

Yet there was also comfort. When home works, there is both safety and challenge. A “home” is successful not because of sameness, but because of unconditional love. And it doesn’t even have to be perfect unconditional love, which is a darn good thing, since human beings are involved. We just have to keep calling ourselves back to it.

Bernice Johnson Reagon, in addition to being an activist, founded the acapella group Sweet Honey in the Rock. Linking music and coalition work, she once said: "After a song the differences between us were not so great. Somehow, making a song required an expression

of that which was common to us all....” What are churches if not places where we sing those songs?

That is especially what it means to be part of a covenantal church—a church that has as its heart not a set of creeds, but a promise to walk together.

If we could hop in a time machine together and travel five years into the future, what would we see here? Where might our “walking” lead us?

Imagine it is the year 2022, and you have traveled down the path in the wildlife habitat. It’s a cool morning, with a light breeze rustling the leaves of those fragrant native plants. You notice the shades are up inside the sanctuary, and you pause to peer in one of these windows.

The first service has just begun. A twenty member choir is singing, and having heard them before, you know a classical song must be filling the sanctuary, flowing over the people in the chairs. They are the auditioned choir, a group that our music director created when Chalice Singers got too big.

In 2017, she worked 36 hours per week- not quite full time. Once we finally got her to 40 hours, it made a difference. She invested first in the children’s music program, bringing music to the RE classrooms, creating the foundations for youth choirs. Then she turned to further developing adult and intergenerational musical offerings. The pastoral care choir grew to 30 singers, who visit bedsides, filling hospital rooms and living rooms with gentle, healing music.

The music program, which was just a long shot dream in 2014, has now come into its full size. As in other large congregations, music at First Unitarian is a thriving, energizing way for members to get to know one another, serve the congregation, become ambassadors from our church to the world, and develop a sense of community.

The worship leaders are standing near the back. When it is time for them to come forward, you watch as the lay leader and ministers walk up on the platform. Did the Senior Minister just wink at you through the window? She probably did.

The service is justice themed. Other Sundays focus on spiritual or educational topics. The Senior Minister is intentional about the balance. Sermons are carefully researched, delivered from the heart, and warm with a sense of humor.

You enter the door from the habitat to the foyer, and head left toward the social hall. It has been completely remodeled inside. The old mural wall is gone, opening up the space. The habitat is visible through the tall, clear new windows on the building’s east side, and a moveable platform sits along the south wall. The room has new flooring and acoustic ceiling tiles. It has a peaceful feel—it isn’t the echo chamber it used to be in 2017. Not that the place is quiet!

The kitchen, which also had a makeover, is bustling with volunteers preparing meals with the leadership of a talented cook. Reusable plastic containers are stacked along the counter.

This is the lay pastoral care team, and they will store dozens of meals in a big church freezer, to be handed out throughout the month to anyone who is sick or grieving, caring for a loved one, or who just welcomed a new baby.

With 25 people on the team, they hear about lots of cases and hand out lots of those containers. Church members care for each other informally, too, and it isn't unusual for a lay pastoral care team member, or in more serious cases, a minister, to run into other UUs visiting at the same time. The care team finally figured out how to organize a ride program for people who can't drive, too, something people had been asking about for years.

In the hall, a bulletin board lists the day's activities: our monthly Civil Conversations Forum will happen at 11 in "Robinson Hall," named when Christine became Minister Emerita.

First Unitarian has become rather well known for its civil conversations project. Once a month, we bring a couple of experts or leaders together to model dialogue across difference. It's a values-based forum, where trained moderators ask questions that get deeper than the tweets and soundbites. In a society that has become polarized, it is healing and intellectually satisfying to attend these respectful, relational conversations. The seats are almost always full.

You see that the Human.kind Team, our diversity team, is holding a brown bag workshop. It seems like there is always something happening around multiculturalism and diversity. You yourself have attended a book group, a workshop, and the field trip to a show at the African American Performing Arts center. Celebrating diversity has become part of the culture of this place. It must be working, you think to yourself, because our congregation and staff are beginning to look like the community in which we live.

You walk out the social hall doors into the courtyard. Incredibly, the old cottonwood is still there. Meanwhile, the smaller trees we planted twenty years ago definitely look ready to take its place. Is it going to outlive them? Nah...

The church campus looks cheerful, well maintained. You sit on a bench. The voices of a growing youth group float through the air. You don't know how they can all fit in the La Amikoj room. The midhigh students are outgrowing their space too for that matter. Good thing our next building project is in the works. We need the space, and a couple more rows of chairs in the sanctuary, for all of the youth and new adult members who join us.

You see the Justice Program Coordinator coming out of the RE building. She must have been talking with the kids about last weekend's rally. Lots of them attended. Since the Coordinator started, the church's justice programming has become more organized and unified. We've deepened our partnerships with community allies. We are a regular presence at events around the city and at the Roundhouse.

And, it is not unusual for reporters to call and ask for the Senior Minister's perspective on an issue. She writes op-eds and does interviews on KUNM. She speaks at rallies. She understands the symbolic power a Senior Minister of a large congregation can have in public, and she has learned to embrace it. Not for the limelight—in fact, she still gets nervous about being on the news and wonders why she didn't just stick to writing. But she

believes deeply in our mission, and in the power of love to shape and strengthen the community.

You hear children's voices on the playground. The first service must be about to end. You are glad you came early, to soak in the peacefulness and joy of this place.

...

In our reading this morning, Jack Mendelson says,

The future of the liberal church
is almost totally dependent on these two factors:
great congregations (whether big or small)
and effective, dedicated ministers.

The strangest feature of their relationship
is that they create one another.

And in our reading last week, David Rankin said,

Everything worth doing in the world is a desperate gamble, a game of chance, where
nothing is certain.

I cannot think of anything more worth doing than helping each other to be a great
congregation with an effective, dedicated new Senior Minister.

And I cannot think of anything more worth doing than walking into our future together,

living out our mission,

embracing our diversity,

creating deep and meaningful community,

reflecting on our lives,

and helping to shape and heal this gorgeous, complicated, wise, hurting old world.

Will you be there with me? Will I be there with you? Let's make it happen.

ⁱ Gilbert, Richard S. The Prophetic Imperative: Social Gospel in Theory and Practice. Skinner House: Boston, 2000. P 134.

ⁱⁱ Reagon, Bernice Johnson. "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century."
<<http://newmodelminority.tumblr.com/post/11778922524/coalition-politics-turning-the-century-by>>