

## Sermon Final

Last Saturday morning about 20 of us met here to begin to discern our goals in the shared ministry of this fellowship. That's a mouthful. Here it is again: Where do we go now that we have built a sanctuary and called a minister? How do we share in moving forward?

Our time together began with each of us writing down a memory of joy we experienced here. Some of us shared those memories. We were all invited to submit what we had written. Here are some of the memories which people had of this fellowship.

- The 1st Sunday I came, Barbara Wilde greeted me warmly. I have always felt like every person in the fellowship cares deeply about lives.
- In my first few weeks I heard different ideas being expressed and discussed. I knew this was for me. Then I was asked if I played bridge. That nailed it
- Dennis's sermons made me cry, feel and heal from deaths in my family. Others accepted my healing journey; I didn't have to hide my feelings.
- Coming back for the 1st time after months away and getting such a warm, joyful welcome from so many people
- I loved when David and Suzan presented the LGBT training and when David had the courage to express himself. I felt that this was most significant to me as it showed the acceptance of the congregation to difference.
- My call to UUFC and the question "Are you an A's or a Giants fan?" The sense of joy and playfulness.

We next split into four groups. Each group had a question to explore. These were the questions. What are the unwritten rules of this fellowship? What are the explicit rules? What are the sacred cows? What are the stories we tell ourselves about who we are?

First, **The Rules**. I found something interesting as I went back through the unwritten rules and the written rules. There was substantial overlap between them. And all but one rule was unwritten! In the two lists of rules, the only written rule was that no food and drink are allowed in the sanctuary. This is interesting to me because it makes statements both about who we are as Unitarian Universalists and who we are as a fellowship. As a denomination we tend to be rule breakers. Historically, we broke from faiths that were doctrinal, that had rules about what we had to believe. We did not accept that. We wanted to formulate our own beliefs--individually. We also have in our DNA that we break rules in protest and to enact societal change. From Unitarian Henry David Thoreau's essay *Civil Disobedience* and Universalist minister Olympia Brown's work for women's suffrage to Selma, where our third minister, Rev. Arthur Wilmot marched alongside other UU ministers, we have broken rules to better society. This fellowship broke the rules in 1961 by calling Rev. Lewis McGee as your 2nd minister, the first African American to serve a UU congregation.

As an historically small body of people in this fellowship, it also makes sense that we would not have written rules. We were small and intimate. There was no need to write rules down because they were conveyed orally or by example. This is a normal situation for our sized congregation.

Here are some of our unwritten rules.

- We have limits on our tolerance for religious and political conservatism
- Only certain people are allowed to "mess" with our landscaping
- We don't get too dressed up on Sundays--I see that I unknowingly have broken that rule.
- We avoid difficult conversations

Something that happens, that must happen, as we grow is that rules and procedures need to be made more explicit. They need to be written down. Why must we do this? People new us will not know our rules. In the process of learning our rules, they may offend us. Worse, they may be chastised and hurt or driven away. Additionally, we need to look critically at our rules and perhaps discard some of them that no longer serve who we are or who we are becoming. Perhaps they are no longer useful. Or perhaps they do not represent who we want to be. For example, avoiding difficult conversations both reduces conflict and reduces intimacy. There are ways to have difficult conversations that are safe and which build intimacy. Isn't that part of why we are here? We want people to know us deeply? We want to change?

Sacred cows. For those of you who may not be familiar with this expression, a sacred cow, which, by-the-way, is a biblical reference, is something we do or believe which CANNOT be changed.<sup>i</sup>

Here are some which came up.

- We end our service in a circle and we sing a particular song in that circle
- We are comfortable with growth, as long as nothing changes. Smile. Does that sound like an oxymoronic statement?
- Our mulberry tree

Here is one which interestingly was not mentioned, but which I have observed. Don't mess with Joys and Concerns.

Sacred cows don't necessarily need to change. What does need to happen is that they should be periodically identified and their usefulness evaluated. Are they still useful? Or is it time to experiment, to try something different, to let go?

We also tell stories about ourselves. Stories, like sacred cows, may be useful, or they may interfere with who we want to be.

One historical story which we told for generations was that we were poor, broke and small. Sounds kind of self-limiting, doesn't it? That began to change about 10 years ago when long

time members Peeti Padden and ~~Megan Johnson~~ came back from General Assembly, inspired by a workshop on generosity. They began the process of intentionally changing that story to the story that has mostly replaced it: we are the little church that could. And you have. And we are wealthy enough to build a sanctuary and call a minister.

Here are some other stories which we tell ourselves.

- We are a welcoming community, both in general and specifically to the LGBTQ communities. That alphabet soup, to those who may not be familiar with it, refers to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning communities.
- We are a revolving door church; meaning, we get new members, old members drift away, our size stays about the same.
- We take care of each other
- We are lay led

**Whoa!** We are lay led. But, you protest, we have hired a minister! To which I say, yes, but. You have a long culture of lay leaders. This is what you are used to. I have been explicitly told, both in search and since, that it is important to keep other voices in the pulpit on a regular basis. Which is good. The ministry of this fellowship is a shared ministry. And not just in the pulpit. But there will also come times when my leadership as your minister may make you squirm. That, too, is natural and expected and is part of growth and creating life affirming change in the world. And we will be in conversation when that happens.

In wrapping up our time together last Saturday, our group of 20 looked at hopes and expectations for me as your minister. The answers were high level. By this I mean that those present didn't get into the weeds, looking at detailed expectations. This is good. You don't want to micromanage. (smile) I like that. Here is what was said. I should represent common values and embody our principles. Specifically, I should embody "Standing on the Side of Love," our denomination-wide proactive stance toward acceptance of and rights for LGBTQ communities and individuals. I am to be myself, take care of myself and have fun. (smile) Finally, I am to lead and share in the ministries which grow our overall membership and in particular our young families and our youth.

After a lunch break, I met with members of your board to get into more detail about the possible; what can I and we actually do without spreading ourselves too thin and accomplishing nothing. We talked about constraints and hopes for this first year together. We will convene again in early November in a half-day retreat to continue our conversation.

Here are some constraints. This fellowship has done amazing things in the past few years. You have conducted a capital campaign, built a sanctuary and called a minister. These are major accomplishments which have required a high level of commitment and sustained energy. You, and particularly your leaders, are understandably tired. This is appropriate. In our first year

together we need to honor and celebrate what we have accomplished. We need to take time to reflect. We need to take time to rest. This has a long and storied tradition among religions of the world. God rested on the 7th day, after six days of creation, in recognition that Earth was very good.<sup>ii</sup> In Leviticus 25, the Lord tells Moses that every seventh year the land shall lie fallow and rest.<sup>iii</sup> Jesus went to the desert for 40 days before he began his ministry.<sup>iv</sup> Muhammad went to the desert to hear the words of the Qur'an.<sup>v</sup> Practicing Buddhists regularly take time to go into silent retreat, to reflect and renew. The Buddha became enlightened after years of reflection. In our hyper-productive world, where Sunday is often just another work day, we rarely take time to rest, celebrate and reflect. I propose that we should. It is not appropriate to immediately jump off into the next thing, whatever that might be.

Another constraint is that I am 3/4 time. Ethically and for the health of my family in this year of huge transition, I need to hold to that. And even if I were full-time, the list of things calling to me would be far longer than I could possibly accomplish. Our facilitator last Saturday, Rev. Jeanelyse Doran Adams, suggested that what a single minister is expected to do would actually take 2 to 2-1/2 ministers. So we need to prioritize, be selective.

Together the board and I sorted out what I needed to bring to the fellowship and what were shared responsibilities with them and with the various ministries of this fellowship.

My list of responsibilities begins with providing inspiring and/or interesting sermons and facilitating transformative worship. (smile) No small order. I'll do my best. These are goals I can aspire to.

While we're on this topic, do you know how much time it takes, on average, to write a sermon and plan worship each Sunday? Across many denominations and across many decades the number is and has been about 20 hours. I see you doing the math. (smile) Thirty minus twenty...That's only 10 hours to do everything else, including the reflective and self-renewal time which sustains and feeds my ministry. This latter time is explicitly included in the hours that ministers work by our professional guidelines. All the more reason we must be selective.

Second. I am to be a good listener, to know the congregation, including the little people and the youth. I am to know the pulse of the congregation.

Third. I am to guide your leaders, in particular your board, wisely.

Finally. I am to represent UUFC in the interfaith community and the wider community.

With your board I share in the governance of this fellowship. This includes the development of policies, management of finances and consultation on staffing.

The Committee on Ministry is another important committee with whom I share responsibility. This committee serves as a liaison between the minister, the congregation and the board, but it has a larger purpose. It is known in some congregations as the Committee on Shared Ministry.

As the name states, this committee is about the shared ministries of this fellowship. Ministries include music, membership, pastoral care, youth and social action, to name a few. It recognizes that my ministry is only one of our ministries, and it helps to coordinate among the ministry teams and align what we are doing with our mission. It assesses the effectiveness of the ministries of this fellowship, including mine. This committee is being formed now, in accordance with our by-laws.

So, you see, there is much to be done. And there is so much that has been done, that you have done. And there are some major things on our calendar this year already. We have our ongoing commitment to serve meals at the Torres Shelter for those who are homeless. In late November we will begin the winter season of the interfaith Safe Shelter by hosting overnight those who do not have someplace like the Torres Shelter to protect them on cold, wet winter nights. We will do this for two weeks. This is a major outreach and will require lots of volunteer time. And, by the way, we are looking for a lead volunteer for this important, time-limited community work.

So, you see, there is much to be done. And there is so much that has been done, that you have done, and continue to do. But propose that we don't take on anything else. I propose that we spend our first year together getting to know one another, one of your goals for me. I suggest that we do some celebrating and resting. I suggest that we begin to explore what it means for us to be in shared ministry of this congregation.

And to that I say Amen and Blessed Be.

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<sup>i</sup> Exodus 32:1-6

<sup>ii</sup> Gen 2:1

<sup>iii</sup> Lev 25.1-7

<sup>iv</sup> Mk 1.13

<sup>v</sup> Mary Pat Fisher, *Living Religions*, 8th ed. 384