

How do we live our (UU) Faith? A Tale of Two Churches

Once upon a time there was a fellowship. They were not really sure they wanted to call themselves a church. There were Christian connotations in the word church that they were not sure that they liked. A fellowship is what they had always called themselves. Churches were bigger. If they were bigger, they wouldn't know everyone. Besides, they were the Little Fellowship that could.

Hadn't they built a beautiful new sanctuary? Hadn't they called a full-time minister. Well, maybe he wasn't quite full-time. But close enough.

They looked around and there were new folks in the sanctuary. A closer look revealed that an increasing number of past leaders, leaders who had gotten them to this point, this juncture, were no longer present, or if present, were no longer in leadership. They were aging out. They were understandably tired. A few had died. A few had moved.

New folks. That was good, right? They were growing, right? Yes, but...

The hard reality was that calling a minister had been a stretch. They had recognized that it would be, and a number of their present and past leaders had made large contributions to build a fund to call a minister. This fund would augment the budget until growth in members and in pledging made up the difference. It would last five years. Surely by then, they'd be big enough. But it didn't last five years. It barely made it three, because the cost of benefits, primarily health care, had been underestimated. And because growth did not happen as quickly as imagined. So here they were, three years in and they were at a junction. The extra money they had raised was gone. Next year, the budget would be radically smaller unless substantial dollars were raised. Property or full-time ministry would be on the chopping block. Who were they going to be?

Meetings were held. Conversations had. A fund drive happened. It fell short, but it raised enough to pay the minister for another three years and keep everything else about the same. The office administrative assistant still worked five hours each week. The music director still worked eight hours per week. There were some very part-time paid teachers but Religious Exploration for children and youth was run by a volunteer, whose plate was very full with her own children and volunteering

for their school activities. Someone on the Board coordinated adult RE. The highly successful Our Whole Lives program was followed by a Coming of Age program, but when the junior high school cohort hit high school, they drifted off. Efforts to establish a youth group ran into a volunteer shortage.

Social action was scattered. Occasionally, there was large participation in an event, such as the Women's March in 2017, but mostly people pursued their own social action interests. There was no concerted effort to identify the church with one or two efforts, to make themselves known as an ally.

Three years after that second fund drive, the Little Fellowship that Could was still little. Sure, they had grown, but they were still short of being able to balance a budget with membership pledges. Maybe in another 2 years they would be there, but the money was gone. What now?

I've spoken about faith and belief for the past two Sundays. About how the original meanings of these words had to do with commitment, loyalty and trust. About how they had nothing to do with accepting a dubious assertion contrary to reason. What might happen if that Little Fellowship that Could trusted that the UU message of love, of respect, of interconnectedness, was one that was needed in the community? In the country? In the world? What if they remained loyal to each other and to their UU principles? What might happen if that trust led to commitment beyond what most of them ever dreamed they might grant to a church, of all things. They might just move mountains.

Once upon a time there was a church. They were not really sure they wanted to call themselves a church, but they were slowly warming to the idea. A fellowship is what they had always called themselves. Churches were bigger. There were Christian connotations in the word church that they were not sure that they liked. But at some point, as they grew, they recognized that they really were a church.

Anyway, this church had been at a turning point. Money raised five years earlier to call a full-time minister had run out. They were not yet big enough to sustain their budget on pledges. Experts said it took about 120 members to do that. They were at 70.

Meetings were held. Conversations had. This church had a mission: They served the community through living their principles. They understood that community meant both those who came regularly through their doors and the larger community beyond their doors. In their meetings and conversations they developed a vision of who they wanted to be in 5 years, in 10 years, a vision of how they would build and support their community.

This once-upon-a-time church had a vision that they would be a partner in ending homelessness in Chico. They had a vision that they would help DACA students on campus.

They had a vision for campus ministry. Their minister had a vision for being a teaching minister, a teaching congregation, for mentoring seminarians toward ministry.

They had a vision of their vibrant music program growing still more, with a larger choir and a variety of other musical offerings in various genres.

How would they achieve this vision? The members realized that their vision could not just happen because they wished it so. They recognized that ministry of the church was not solely up to their minister and that what a minister does is only part of the ministry of the church. They heard what a new member from a larger church said, "To be larger, you've got to act larger." They also heard what another new member said: "A successful fund drive has to be about more than balancing the budget."

To act larger, they began to identify and groom future leaders. Money was set aside in the budget every year for formal training of a few of these leaders. They recognized that they could no longer rely on the tiny piece of professional admin help they paid for each week. They spoke with other churches about staffing and job descriptions. They took to heart what they read about how churches often staff for decline. They took to heart what they read about how better staffing often increases volunteerism. They imagined how more administrative help might help them live their mission and achieve their vision. They budgeted for increased administrative assistance.

They recognized that their vision required full-time ministry, full-time ministry that they acknowledged and paid for. There was an equity issue involved. So they budgeted for full-time ministry.

Top of their list for creating the church that they envisioned was welcoming young families. RE was critical to this. They budgeted for a part-time Director of Religious Exploration, someone who would work with their minister to coordinate a vibrant children's, youth and adult RE program. They budgeted for his participation in the UU Liberal Religious Educators Association, LREDA.

When their minister reached final fellowship and became eligible to be a teaching minister, the congregation, with seed money from the UUA, funded an intern minister program. Following the highly successful, long running model of the Davis UU church, the position was written for half-time parish ministry and half-time campus ministry. The church began the important work of becoming a teaching church while reaching out to present and future UU's on campus.

As their choir grew in numbers and the musical offerings in complexity, they realized that they needed to support their music director with additional hours. These hours were added to the budget. They also budgeted for her participation in the annual UU Musicians Network gathering to collaborate with and learn from colleagues throughout the continent.

As they did these things, as they lived their mission, their numbers grew. In a few years they found that they were bursting at the seams on Sunday mornings. It was time to think about another service. Would it also be on Sunday morning or perhaps Saturday evening? Would it have the same organization or something completely different? What part of their community, or potential community, did they want to reach with this second service. These were scary but fun conversations to have.

A tale of two churches. A tale of committed, loyal and trusting UU's. In short, a tale of UU's living their Faith. Amen