

Mission and Commitment
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix
Sunday, March 24, 2019
Rev. Margret A. O’Neill

The Mission of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix: Welcoming all in building religious community, called to share journeys, grow in spirit, advance justice.

The Stewardship Team spent a couple of hours last fall deeply contemplating the meaning of commitment here at UUCP and came up with the theme for this spring’s annual budget drive: Realizing Our Mission. So much of the focus here at UUCP tends to be on your vision – the description of who you wish to be: theologically diverse, radically inclusive, justice centered. That is a powerful call into possibility.

A vision is about future possibility, and a mission is something different – it is the glowing coal at the center of your being, what author Jim Loehr calls your “unassailable purpose . . . the thing that continually renews your spirit, the thing that gets you to stop and smell the roses. It is the indomitable force that moves you to action when nothing else can, yet it can ground you with a single whisper in your quietest moment; it is at once the bedrock of your soul and . . . the wind beneath your wings. It spells out the most overarching goals you want and need to achieve in your time here, and the manner in which you feel you must do it . . .in accordance with your values and beliefs.”

The message that renews your spirit, the bedrock for your soul, the wind beneath your wings. . . Welcoming all ... building community . . . sharing journeys ... growing in spirit . . . advancing justice.

I have learned so much from all of you about being a congregation that seeks truly to welcome all. Starting last fall, we began sharing a journey to live into the vision of radical inclusion, being truly welcoming to those of all genders, beyond the standard binary male and female that we now know is simply not true for so many people – perhaps not really true for anyone, since our cellular structures are more various than we know. This congregation has been working since October to understand gender expansiveness, and to create and label spaces here where all feel welcome and safe. Just this week, we finally have a set of signs posted on the restrooms, and we are inviting your comments and suggestions.

Jonny Lifshitz, who is part of the Inclusion Team, a youth advisor and a Trustee of this congregation, created a message about these signs and the basic human needs map that goes with them. Jonny’s words:

When learning a new language, many have found success with post-it notes on common household objects. The same can hold true when welcoming a friend, guest, or stranger into a new space - it is important to orient them to their surroundings.

The Inclusion Team, with input from YRUU, the Staff, and the Board, want to be radically inclusive in welcoming people to UUCP. They have drafted a map of where to fulfill your basic human needs - peace of mind, audio amplification, nourishment, hydration, and even where to relieve yourself. Yes, the contentious bathroom issue is moving towards a solution. When you arrived this morning, you may have noticed markers hanging from the ceiling. Each marker indicates where to fulfill one or more basic human needs.

And, just so you don't go wandering all over campus, there is a map located within steps (or pushes and rolls) from the front entrance. The map indicates where to fulfill your basic human needs. By the way, you are currently in the sanctuary to fulfill your spiritual needs!

*The most important phase of being radically inclusive is **now**. The human needs map and the signage on the bathrooms are open for comment. Please spend some time reviewing what our teams have come up with. If you want to revise, add, edit, or comment, there are post-it notes to make those suggestions. We'll take suggestions over the next three weeks and share the updated draft. After the time of input and revision, we will commission permanent signs and a map to be hung, along with markers around campus.*

I will add to Jonny's words a reminder that these are all in draft form, and once there is broad consensus that we have the right words and symbols – and we already got the message that we needed to update to the racy wheelchair symbol, so that has been added -- we will make sure they are posted in English, in Spanish and in Braille, and the best most understandable symbols, to make them truly accessible to all.

We welcome all, and we build community. We build community freely and with intention, strongly rooted in our Unitarian Universalist tradition and the rich heritage of this congregation. We choose to be here – no one makes us come, no one even threatens us with dire consequences if we do not. No, you will not go to hell if you skip being here on a Sunday to go out and hike the mountains and canyons in this season of beauty. But you will miss out on a wonderful community experience and really amazing music!

We build connections of love and hope, acting from our powerful mission, reaching out for the visionary future we create together, seeking to bring ever deeper connection, broader welcome, and a more effective presence in the world. We are here because religious community is what we need to be whole, finding in each other the support, the strength to lead our individual and sometimes isolated lives. We turn to our neighbor and see our joy and our pain reflected in each others' eyes, our hopes and our dreams lived out in each others' lives. We see in each other our common heritage and destiny. That is what it is to be part of beloved community; that is what it means to connect and create that community in a congregation.

The Covenant of Commitment to this congregation is an agreement for how we will build and sustain religious community together. Rev. Tom Owen-Towle, in his book *Growing a Beloved Community*, notes that “the Unitarian Universalist path is more a communal spiritual journey than a personal exploration of faith . . . The growth of a soul is the work not of an individual but of a community; our independent wills [are charged] to serve the interdependent web.”

We welcome all and build religious community so that we can share journeys, since those journeys nourish our lives, our spirits, our whole selves. Tom Owen-Towle quotes 19th-century American philosopher Josiah Royce, who coined the phrase Beloved Community to describe a congregation, as saying, “since the office of religion is to aim towards the creation on earth of the Beloved Community, the future task of religion is the task of inventing and applying arts which shall win all over to unity, and which shall overcome their original hatefulness by the gracious love, not of mere individuality, but of communities.”

We thrive, as Royce says, not only in the love of individuals, but in that broader embrace of the loving community which we build together, and into which we gather. That is why we come on Sunday and in all the other ways we gather and build; that is why we worship, worth shape, together.

We welcome, build, and share our journeys so that we may grow in spirit. In this beloved community we explore and affirm our values and commitments; we deepen and strengthen our best and highest selves. Together we may better learn to live into our call to overcome

hatefulness by the means of gracious love -- gracious love that does not demand or expect anything in return, compassionate love that respects human worth and dignity with justice, compassion and a liberating spirit.

We welcome, build, share and grow so that we may advance justice. We live in a world that desperately needs the gracious, embracing, respectful, healing love to which we are called by our Unitarian Universalist principles.

The tragedy of war, the persistence of human trafficking, the exploitation of workers, the oppressions of gender, of race, of sexuality, of youth or age; the detention of migrants and the shooting and jailing of young black men – the headlines every day remind us why we come together in commitment to this congregation, in commitment to the mission we share.

So we are called, and so we respond in love. Our Unitarian Universalist congregations are part of what is called the “free church” tradition -- not that they somehow run themselves for free, because you know they don’t -- but rather that each congregation is a community of people who freely choose to gather and bind themselves into a relationship of commitment.

Each congregation is an independent non-profit organization that is self-organizing and self-sustaining; we commit to support these institutions that reflect our highest values, and we organize ourselves by an agreement that defines how we will be together. That kind of agreement could be called a contract or an understanding; a promise or a pact or an accord -- but the term we choose to use in our congregations is “covenant.” It can be a noun -- we create or read a covenant -- or as I like it even better, it can be a verb: we covenant with each other, and in so doing we also covenant with whatever we understand as ultimate reality.

A valid covenant binds us not only together in solidarity, but joins us into a larger context, a loftier purpose, in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. That is what our tradition of “free religion” means – we make the very intentional decision to join together, and to dedicate ourselves to the work we undertake together to create the world as we dream it may be.

No one else dreams our dreams, creates the structures and processes, or takes care of the congregation for us – it is a team effort, created by the steps we take on the path together. We freely agree to bind ourselves into a community of shared commitment that supports each of us to live faithfully in the world. Creating a covenantal institution committed to our values and our shared loyalties is one way to help assure that we live lives of integrity, as we share our wisdom, support each other in our best intentions, and hold ourselves and each other accountable to the impact of our actions, and to our mission and our vision in the world.

We are by no means perfect in our attempts to achieve integrity, and so part of living in covenantal relationship is a constant renewal of our commitment, acknowledging that we fall short, beginning again and again in love, renewing our covenants, rededicating ourselves to love, truth, and service; to the goals of peace and freedom.

Next week we will celebrate Commitment Sunday, a time when we make a tangible, real commitment to the health and future of this congregation. The Stewardship Team has issued a challenge for everyone to make a financial commitment this year, especially if you have not done so before, a commitment that demonstrates the value of this congregation in your life. And for those who have pledged in the past, we are asking you to increase your financial commitment if you can, to support the success of the next settled ministry in this historic congregation; to support your skilled and dedicated administrative and program staff, to maintain the beautiful

buildings and grounds, for your shared mission of welcoming all, building community, sharing journeys, growing in spirit, advancing justice.

Earlier in the service we read together the covenant of commitment to this congregation, and I invited you to consider and then to write about what that covenant means in your life, in your relationships, in your commitment to this beloved community. If you have not already done so, I invite you to write a note on the card that you received when you entered, or found on your seat, about your commitment, your sense of connection, and what actions you take to live into that covenant. What actions do you take, or will you take, to what do you commit, as we live together in covenant? We will collect your cards, and study them, and I will bring your words back to you in the coming weeks as we reflect on how this covenantal community moves into the unfolding future of promise and possibility.

Each Sunday we light the chalice and consider the power of the flame, the flame of commitment in this amazing faith tradition. I hope for us, each and all, that the fire of commitment may continue to burn bright and true, and that it may light our shared journey home. I invite you now to rise in body or spirit and join in singing #1028 in the teal hymnal, the Fire of Commitment.

Sources:

Loehr, Jim (2007-09-18). *The Power of Story* (p. 42- 44). Simon & Schuster, Inc.. Kindle Edition

Tom Owen-Towle (2004). *Growing a Beloved Community: Twelve Hallmarks of a Healthy Congregation*. Boston: Skinner House Books.