

The UU Church of the Future

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In May I sat down to write a letter to the members and friends of this church. It was a letter written quickly, in the rush of understanding that I had made a decision and every moment counted in letting all of you know that I would be leaving this congregation. It probably will not surprise many of you to know that I have a deep fondness for letter writing; for penning the kinds of thoughts that have simmered long enough to be entrusted to the page.

There is a special kind of love in the writing of letters.

As I began thinking of what could possibly be important enough to say to you on my last Sunday in the pulpit, I realized that I had been writing you a letter in my heart since I first imagined the privilege of serving as your minister. It is one that I began while reading our congregational record, talking to John Schick about exchanging packets, and sitting in Christie Kelley's house with our search committee.

That letter is as short as a breath. It would fit on a postcard if I could find an image compelling enough to match its importance. This is what that letter would say:

You are the Unitarian Universalist church of the future.

That's it. It sounds almost hokey, and yet I believe it with all the passion of a convert, all the faith of a minister that has seen you rise to challenges and birth new ideas for this congregation.

There are many experts who would tell us about the future church. Mainline denominations and postmodern churches alike have been experiencing decline since the 1950s. I keep hearing that the UUA is one of the few religious movements that have experienced growth in the last ten years, but Michael Durall, an expert whose wisdom I truly trust, reports that only 5% of Unitarian Universalist congregations have seen measurable growth in the last decade.¹

We are seeing more and more Americans turning away from organized religion to alternate sources of liberation and strength. Nevertheless we clearly believe that there is an importance in our gathering. As a faith tradition that promotes no punishment for skipping church, our members – I hope – belong to Unitarian Universalist congregations because they choose to, because they find some benefit in our communal worship.

Yet Durall has written that “the UU church of the future will be unrecognizable from the UU church of today.”² He insists that the radically different church of tomorrow is crucial

¹ Durall, Michael. *The Almost Church*, p. 4.

² Durall, Michael. *The UU Church of the Future*, p 1.

to our survival as a religious movement. I am going to share some of Durall's vision for the future church with you, and I am betting that as he suggests, many of his ideas will seem ridiculous. But before I do I want to explain why I believe that the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton is the UU Church of the Future.

~pause~

Every Unitarian Universalist congregation is slightly different. This is one of the best outcomes from following a faith tradition which encourages a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Each community's journey results in a different church culture that grows from its members. I knew that Stockton would be different from any other Unitarian Universalist congregation that I had experienced. I knew of our strong and proud Humanist heritage. I had heard glowing reports of our history of social outreach and civic support. I had even experienced the beauty of this sanctuary and understood that beauty would be a required element on Sunday mornings.

There was one significant aspect of our congregation's culture that I did not expect – *an openness to change*. This is a gift that few of our UU churches have. We get comfortable with the way things are and can be leery to try to something new. But I didn't find that here. I knew that I would be a minister unlike any you had had before. Try to picture Rev. Green and me side by side and you will understand what I mean. Yet time and again I was surprised by the openness of our lay leaders, members, and friends to trying new things.

Everything I had been taught in seminary told me that the pillars of the church in particular might be the most reticent to accept change. But here I found the opposite to be true. It was often our most dedicated and long time leaders who would come to me with new ideas, or to share something that they had learned elsewhere and believed could work for us. That is an incredible gift. And if I could wish one thing for this congregation it would be for you to embrace that flexible strength and completely revitalize Unitarian Universalism in the valley.

~pause~

This city is perfectly poised for a large, publicly known liberal religious church. Stockton is growing faster than ever before and a large portion of that growth is an influx of people from the Bay Area. Our community is swelling with liberal minded individuals who are hungry for opportunities for community gathering and involvement. Imagine if more of them knew that they could find a religious home which would be shaped by their needs and beliefs, which was longing to get ever more involved in the social justice outreach of this city. Imagine what Sunday morning worship, or better still a Tuesday night service, might look like two years down the road.

You are sitting on the cusp of a new beginning. While the ministry of this church has always been owned by its members, you will have a new resource person to draw from, and share ministry with, in a matter of weeks. I have no idea what that new shared ministry might lead to but I know that it will be strengthened by your openness to change.

That openness is what will lead on you on the path to becoming the UU church of the future.

~pause~

Durall describes his vision of our future congregations. He writes,

“These churches will have no steeples, no organs, no pews, and no stained glass windows. They are likely to be warehouses in low-rent industrial districts... These places will be noisy and boisterous, full of excitement and energy. Worship will be highly participatory, like youth services at General Assembly today. People will be close together, sing loudly, and have their arms about one another’s shoulders. The music – jazz, blues, rock and roll, and rap – will be live, performed by professional musicians. The lighting will be colorful and dramatic. These services will go on for two hours or more, after which people will stay and share a meal together, a gourmet fare prepared by a first-rate caterer. Potluck is a relic of the past.”³

Can you imagine a church that truly reaches out to people of all ages and backgrounds, and works to draw them into worship that speaks to them in their own cultural language? Churches which can be accessed by public transportation and where no one finds themselves out of place? We would leave such services riled up and ready to take on the world! Can you even imagine?

Durall goes on to say that “worship will be conducted in two or three languages, alternating from one to another, with the text of hymns and prayer projected onto large screens, so that all can participate to some extent. Language classes will be offered before and after services. These churches will attract interracial couples, both straight and gay, bringing the mix we have never been able to achieve before.”⁴

I can visualize such worship, in this city which is populated by people of such diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. I can dream of a congregation whose fluidity with language strives to match that found in our schools and works to educate its members to truly build a respectful global community.

I think perhaps my favorite idea of Durall’s is that “These churches will follow the example of the Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church in Houston, where one dollar is given away for the needs of the world for every dollar spent on the church. The people in these congregations will achieve a goal that Howard University Professor Kortright Davis dreams about, that of “breaking the current cycle of people whose dominant image is *being served*, rather than to serve.”⁵

We have made such financial strides as a congregation over the past two years. Our members and friends are pledging more generously, we are much less shy when we talk about money, we have been giving our offering away to benefit this community once per month, and our canvass was done face to face this year – with no hiding in the shadows. I can dream of a day when this church might reach the goal that Durall describes so

³ Durall, Michael. *The UU Church of the Future*. p. 2.

⁴ Durall, Michael. *The UU Church of the Future*. p. 2.

⁵ Durall, Michael. *The UU Church of the Future*. p. 3.

clearly. How good would it feel to be the future church that gives one dollar to the betterment of the community for every dollar spent on heat, light, art, education, or ministry? How enticing would such a community be? Durall believes that actions like these are what will draw new UUs into our religious homes.

He states that “These new UUs will draw others to their churches not because of evangelical rhetoric but because people will want to be associated with them. The ministers of these congregations realized long ago that the mission of the church is simply stated – to transform lives. They realized the visions of UU churches in the past, to create community and seek the truth, were ineffective and did not create people whose lives were based on commitment and service. Their goal is spirituality through service.”⁶

What would most transform your lives? I can imagine what spirituality through service might mean to a congregation like ours. I can see this church raising the kind of money that would be needed to fund a school, as many of you have mentioned in your hopes for the future of education in this city. I can envision us donating our time each season as gleaners - harvesting wasted food left in the fields and donating it to our local food banks. I can picture our youth and adult members working to clean up our local environment and doing the kind of education and political lobbying that might protect our water supply for future generations.

The seeds of all of these possibilities already exist here; in dreams that you have shared with me, in the skills you possess, in the level of need that is so easy to see in our surrounding community.

The point is that periods of transition are when change is most possible. Now is when dreaming matters. This is your church, and it has been changing for a while. That is what happens after very long ministries. It takes time for us to fully know our identities as a church again. This congregation’s future depends on what is revealed to you as people of faith. It depends on that knowledge that you hold within yourselves and your willingness to take on something new because you know, on a soul level, that it will make a difference; that it is your contribution to make to this world.

I am choosing to leave a healthy portion of my faith with you. Because I know, from the place within me where dreams and prayers are born, that this community is going to continue to grow and thrive. Never underestimate yourselves. You are needed in this world.

May you welcome your next ministers with as much love as you have shown me. And together, may you build a great future.

Amen, Ashe, and Blessed Be.

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⁶ Durall, Michael. *The UU Church of the Future*. p. 3.