

“The State of the Congregation”
Interim Minister’s Annual Report Sermon
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Danbury
May 3, 2009

UUCD’s Annual Meeting is coming up next Friday. With that in mind, I thought this would be a good Sunday for a State of the Congregation sermon, in which I would share my thoughts as your Interim Minister. What I’d like to give you this morning is my view of the big picture. A more nuts-and-bolts report will appear in the written materials you receive.

For those of you just joining us for the first time this morning, please accept my apologies for this “institutional” sermon. I know that this is not what you came to church for! I hope you’ll find some little nugget in the sermon that connects with your life experience, and that you can take away with you, and I hope you’ll come and visit us again soon. As Sky Kimball said, in his welcome, our services vary, and this one is atypical.

It’s been almost exactly nine months since I arrived in Danbury last August. That nine-month period calls up images of gestation periods, and giving birth. But it’s important to note: As interim, I’m at most the midwife. It’s the congregation, all of you, who gives birth! I’m here only help you do the work - to coach and encourage, to cheer you on.

The birth analogy raises a question: To what are you, the congregation, giving birth? What is struggling to be born, here on The Ridge?

It’s almost six years since you left The Barn’s lovely, secluded, setting and moved into the city, becoming the UU Congregation of Danbury. The move was long in the making, the result of a bold and compelling vision. As Task Force 2001’s report, written in 1997, put it, you initiated the move into Danbury for the purpose of “enhancing our diversity and accessibility” – making UUCD’s “good news” available to more people – and “enhancing our presence as a force for good and activism in the wider community.”

An Interim Minister is always an outsider. Looking from the outside, I would say that the dream that led you back into Danbury is bearing fruit. New folks are coming into the congregation, adding their gifts and enthusiasm to the wealth of talent already here.

At the same time, UUCD is gaining visibility for its work in the wider community. The New Sanctuary Movement is one example of this; members of the Social Action Committee gave an excellent workshop at the District meeting yesterday. The “Sow Green” initiative is another, as the Community Garden takes shape.

From an Interim Minister’s perspective, you are an awesome congregation, and you have a whole lot going for you! The talent that you bring to The Ridge is amazing. Enthusiasm is high. You know how to laugh together. You’re devoted in caring for one another, and you are as welcoming to newcomers as any congregation I’ve seen.

You're also conscientious about trying to "walk the talk," putting principles into action. And your dynamics seem basically healthy, with a history of dealing productively with conflict. Not every congregation can claim that, believe me.

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And yet, here you are, on the eve of an Annual Meeting, wondering about the future. The trigger for this is a budget shortfall – a gap of \$32,000 between projected income and projected spending. But the anxiety goes deeper than that. There's concern that the congregation hasn't grown since moving to The Ridge. There's questioning, even self-doubt. Some are even asking, "can we afford a full-time minister?"

The short answer to that question, in my view, is that you can't afford *not* to have a full-time minister - not if you want to flourish. But it *is* worth asking: What's holding UUCD back? What is keeping you, so far, from fully realizing the dreams that brought you to The Ridge?

I see three factors coming into play. The first is a simple one: time. I'm actually not surprised that you haven't grown – yet. Growth doesn't happen overnight. You might think of UUCD as a transplanted tree. Before new growth becomes visible, the tree must first get over the shock of transplant, take root underground, and extend a taproot deep into the soil. Only then can it branch out, and put forth new blossoms and leaves.

I do think it's happening here. But it does take time. And in the last six years, you've had a lot of "transplant shock." Think about it: You called Linda Hansen as your minister, you built a building, you moved twice, and then had Linda leave. If there were a "life stress scale" for congregations, you'd be right up there!

And so I'd like to encourage you not to beat yourselves up about your lack of numerical growth, *so far* – and instead congratulate yourselves on how far you have come, and how much you have done.

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But there's a second factor in play here. This has to do with the dynamics of size transition. When congregations reach certain sizes, they tend to plateau, and not grow beyond it. One of those plateau sizes is 80 members; that's a "family sized congregation." 150 is another; the "pastoral sized congregation." 350 and 600 are the next steps up. Congregations who reach those sizes tend to reach a steady state. For every member who joins, another drops out. The only way to transcend that dynamic is to organize differently – to find a new way of being a congregation.

UUCD has been at one of these plateaus for many years, hovering around a mark of about 150 members. Growing beyond this particular plateau has many names. The Alban Institute calls it the "pastoral-to-program transition." Others prefer to call it a transition from a "minister-centered" to a "ministry-centered" congregation. Robert Latham, a long-time interim minister, speaks of "moving beyond Church Folly Lane." Perhaps the simplest terminology comes from the UUA, which talks about "Breakthrough Congregations."

How can UUCD become a Breakthrough Congregation? My best judgment is that UUCD will not get past the 150-member mark without making a deliberate *decision* to do it, and a *commitment* – and then backing up that commitment with careful planning and action. One helpful step in that direction would be to create a Growth Team, made up both of new and long-time members. This team would study the dynamics of breakthrough, and come up with an Action Plan.

But before that happens, a threshold question must be answered: “Why do we want to grow? Why is growth important?” Growing for the sake of numbers doesn’t make it. Even weaker is the idea of adding more members so that you can pay the bills. Think about it: how would *you* respond if you thought a congregation was interested in you solely because of your money?

The main reason for growing, perhaps the *only* compelling reason, is to make your dreams come true! Breaking through the size barrier allows growth in your ministry and mission. It expands your capacity to be a force for good in the world. And it opens your doors to the wider community; it offers welcome and hospitality to a world in need. It makes our Unitarian Universalist faith available to *all* the people out there who hunger for religion without dogma, who long for the beloved community, who seek a sense of purpose and meaning for their lives.

Once in a while, I hear someone express a certain fear: that UUCD, when it grows, will lose its identity, the warm sense of intimacy that you shared in The Barn. It’s important, then, to say this: Larger congregations don’t lose that intimacy. They just have to organize for it differently – through Chalice Circles, for example. They have to plan for it, rather than expecting it to happen spontaneously.

It also helps to remember this: When a congregation grows, something new and vibrant connects people to the whole. Not the intimacy of a single cell, but that of participating in a shared vision, being part of something greater than ourselves.

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Factor #3 – you knew I was going to get to this, didn’t you? - is money. Or, perhaps more accurately, *anxiety* about money. Yes, we’re in the midst of a global economic crisis, which has disrupted peoples’ lives and cut into the endowment. But UUCD was having financial issues before the global crisis began.

For some years now, you’ve engaged in deficit spending - invading reserves as a substitute for strong pledging. Simple math tells us that this can’t go on forever, and the Board has wisely decided to submit a balanced budget to the annual meeting.

Of course, there are two ways of eliminating a deficit. You can cut expenses – or you can raise more income. This may seem too obvious to mention. But most of the conversation I hear around here has been about cutting budgets, not about boosting the income side. In fact, some have even suggested that the congregation cut its already bare-bones staff, have a part-time interim minister next year - and abandon the idea of full-time ministry.

Well, deficit spending can’t go on forever, but neither can budget cutting – not without a loss of momentum, and a loss of vitality and morale. This is especially true with regard to professional leadership.

Historically speaking, eliminating ministry positions has almost always led to the decline of congregations. Some have tried it, but as one UUA staffer points out, “The fellowships that took that tack did not thrive and grow. They either shriveled or recommitted to being UU congregations [with professional ministry].” In fact, one congregation in this District that went to part-time ministry last year has decided to return to full-time for next year.

Whether it’s me, or someone else, I do think you need a full-time interim next year. More important, you need to continue with the process that will bring you a new settled minister in the fall of 2010. Don’t abandon that dream now!

But you also need to raise more money, and you need to raise it now! The good news is that the \$32,000 gap isn’t as formidable as it may seem at first. Doing some simple math helps us here: UUCD now has 146 members, and about 30 active friends. If each member and friend finds an extra \$100 per year to contribute – that’s less than \$2.00 a week, or 30 cents a day - then you’ve cut the deficit by half. If each person finds an extra \$200 per year – less than \$4.00 per week - the deficit is gone.

That’s a very simple approach - some would say simplistic. There are certainly more creative approaches to the problem, and I’m hoping some of you will step up to the plate and offer them! I offer the simple math solution only to say: The goal is within reach. You can do it! You *can* close this gap, and you can do it now. You can set this congregation – *your* congregation - on the road to realizing its potential, of making its dreams come true.

And when you do it, the glory days of UUCD will be just beginning.