

“THE STATE OF THE CONGREGATION, 2012”
Interim Minister’s Annual Report Sermon
The Rev. Sue Redfern-Campbell
May 6, 2012

Let me begin by congratulating you! Your call to the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon - a bright young minister of exceptional talents - is truly thrilling. It’s the sort of thing that’s music to the ears of an interim minister. As it happens, your vote was taking place while I was in the air, en route from Albuquerque to St. Louis. But a message from Steve Scott popped up as soon as we had landed, so I got the news in good time.

I can tell you now what I couldn’t before, that I’d had a good feeling about Rev. Molly’s candidacy from the first time I learned it might happen. As interim minister, I’m not supposed to get involved in the search, or express an opinion on any of the candidates. But potential candidates do call interims, to get their take on the church, and I spoke with Molly as part of this process. When I read her credentials, I was elated. I thought to myself, “Wow - this woman is a rock star!”

Later on, when I heard that the Search Committee had chosen her, I thought, “I hope the congregation recognizes how lucky they are!” Now it’s clear that you do, from the great Candidating Week turnout, and from the near-unanimous vote to call. Of course, Molly and James are very, very lucky, too - and I’m deeply glad for all of you.

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As I was preparing this sermon, it occurred to me that perhaps it’s presumptuous at this point for me to offer any opinion at all about “the state of the congregation.” An interim minister is always an outsider, and during Candidating Week my job was to stay far, far away from the church. Thus I can only imagine what you all experienced - a palpable sense of excitement, possibility, and unity.

I’d like to affirm that excitement. What’s more, I sense that the “high” of Candidating Week is also grounded and realistic, because it’s based on the important work that you’ve done over the last two years and before. Henry David Thoreau once wrote, “If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.”

The foundations, I think, have substantially been laid. For example, the Board and I have worked hard for the last couple of years on developing a workable governance structure, one that is nimble, flexible, and permission-giving - far more likely to say “Yes” than “No” to ministry opportunities.

This structure establishes the Board of Trustees as a *policy-making body* - casting vision, determining strategies, and ensuring the safety of people and the good stewardship of resources. As a consequence, it allows staff and volunteers to *carry out the congregation's ministries* within broad boundaries, free of Board micromanagement. It also emphasizes action-oriented Ministry Teams and Task Forces over permanent standing Committees.

Another thing that has happened during these past two years is that your sense of identity has become clearer - your vision of who you are and who you might become as a congregation. During the search process, some clear themes began to emerge, and this clarity allowed the Search Committee to make its inspired choice: You want to be more visible in the community, and on the local campuses. You aspire to greater engagement in movements for social justice and community service. And you are ready to grow - not only in membership, but also in depth, diversity, and spirit.

Yet another hopeful sign is that you seem to be avoiding one of the pitfalls of calling a new minister. That's the way it seems so far, at least. Sometimes, lay leaders get tired from working so hard during the interim period, and on the search. As a result, everyone breathes a great gasp of relief when the new minister comes on board - and leaves this person holding the bag.

Now, it's reasonable to expect that *some* of you will need a break after the intensity of this year. You just shouldn't all take it at once! But I'm not really worried about this, for as I talk with people here, I sense that many of you are inspired, energized, and ready for deeper involvement. I think it speaks volumes that this year's Board election is contested, with excellent candidates excited about moving into leadership. To those of you who aren't elected to the Board today: you will be hearing from us! We will find some other meaningful way to use your talents.

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In sum, my assessment is that UUCC is poised and ready to take off! But let me revisit two issues that I also raised in last year's report, that I still think need addressing. If they're not attended to, they will create needless drag on your wings. One of them has to do with Membership; the other, with Money.

Concerning Membership: Last year, I expressed concern about the decline in adult membership that has taken place since 2007 - a slippage of almost 15 percent, from 255 to 218. This year there was again a slight decline, but I'm hopeful that this will soon turn around. Part of my hope comes from anticipating Rev. Molly's arrival. But I also know that systems are now in place that were only in the beginning stages at this time last year. These include the Care Ministry Team, which has done a superb job in reaching out to current church members, and a reconstituted Membership Team, whose mission is to welcome and integrate new people.

Let me emphasize one thing about the Membership Team: Hospitality is rightly the work of the entire congregation, not just the work of a small team. We all need to cultivate what one colleague of mine calls “the Membership Eye,” seeing the congregation not only as those already here, but also as those who will come. All of us need to see ourselves as evangelists - for this church, and for our liberal faith.

Here’s one way to think about it: When the Care Ministry Team extends a call for volunteers - to offer meals, give rides, or make phone calls - you respond very generously. The Membership Team needs the same kind of support, when *it* calls for greeters, ushers, and other helpers. Welcoming the stranger - the person who comes through our door seeking a religious home - is a deep spiritual practice, perhaps one of the most significant things we can do as a community. As UUA President Peter Morales has said, “Growing our movement is not an institutional need. Growing Unitarian Universalism is a moral imperative - the moral equivalent of feeding the hungry and housing the homeless.”

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As for Money: The results of this year’s pledge drive, “The Power of Two,” are pretty good so far, and there’s a good possibility that you will meet your goal of \$200,000. But here you are, on the day you’re supposed to pass the budget, with many pledge cards still out. Pledge drive veterans tell me that this situation tends to be constant here.

I’m not sure what’s at the root of this. But I’ll be blunt: Chronic pledge shortfalls cripple congregations. They lead to short ministries. They deprive hardworking staff of just compensation. Most important, they sap energy - diverting it away from the congregation’s real work, to transform lives, and bring healing and hope to a hurting world.

Many of you, I realize, turned in your pledge cards weeks or months ago. And many of you are already pledging at sacrificial levels. This message is not intended for you! But if you know someone who has not yet pledged, or who could give a little more, I encourage you to talk to them. Remind them that UUCC is their religious community, too, and that the hallmark of a free church is that it depends on its members for its financial support.

As an outsider soon to be leaving, I implore you: Please don’t hobble your future. Get this new partnership off to a vigorous start! Welcome your new minister with robust stewardship, and a strong budget! And don’t do it for me, or even for Rev. Molly. Do it for yourselves, for your religious home - and for the difference you can make in the world.

When you do this, then you’ll truly be ready to spread your wings and take flight.