

UUCM Facilities Exploration Workshop – January 7, 2023

Chalice Lighting words

by Lynn Ungar

*First set the warp,  
the plain, stable threads  
that hold the pattern in place –  
the infrastructure of joy,  
the girders that hold up all we build  
of meaning, or justice, or peace.*

*Use strong threads left  
by those who have gone before.  
Only then pick up the weft,  
the colored thread that you will use  
to weave according to your plan.*

*Choose carefully – this is what  
the world will see, each tiny act  
that builds the bright pattern  
of your life. Yes, the threads  
will tangle or knot or fray,  
and the flaws will show.*

*Oh well. Tuck in the ends  
as best you can and start again.  
This is not the time to stop your weaving.  
So much is pulling at the great design.*

Rev. KevinTarsa's Facilities Reflection (Yes, sermon)  
January 7, 2023  
Unitarian Universalist Community of the Mountains

After the conversation about the building/facilities needs for this congregation began, realized that every UU congregation I've served has undertaken a large building project.

Which means, in part, that I'm not afraid of them.

The first UU congregation I was a part of, in northern Michigan, built its first building from scratch on property donated by members just outside the city limits, and the congregation had outgrown the building by the time it moved in. They sold a piece of the property to put in another 20 or so parking spaces - and still had to hold two services on Sunday. I had started as a member and volunteer, then over the years became staff and an ordained minister of music. Before I ended my ministry there, a major addition was built to add classroom space, and overflow parking was often running down both sides of the driveway and taking up roadside space such that local officials were expressing concern about traffic safety on that county road.

That first building project was such a beautiful and thorough process, with information communicated throughout and abundant input sought from everyone and many times, around everything from *whether* to build and what money could be raised, to the design of the building. I was a rather new member and that point I remember how impressed reassured I was by the thoroughness, and how excited I was by the courage.

During a ministerial internship in 2011-12, I served a congregation in Massachusetts, whose first church building was built in 1642. Their current building was constructed in 1814/15, with a bell, still in use in the belfry, cast by the foundry of Paul Revere and Son.

At some point afterward they had found a way to divide the tall sanctuary into an upstairs and a downstairs, later to add an elevator and some office space in the back, and, at some point, to build a separate two-story office and classroom building. But the new building did not have an elevator.

The year I was serving as an intern, they were designing and preparing to build a two-story walkway that would link the two buildings, so people could use the existing elevator in the church to get up to the second floor, and then the second-floor walkway to get over to the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor classrooms. Plus, now children wouldn't have to go outside to get from the service in the church to their Religious Education time in the classroom building.

I followed with an interim music ministry in Michigan, at a church where Anita had once been a member and a mover and shaker, a building which had previously been a fraternity house, to which they had eventually added a large cinderblock sanctuary. By the time I was serving there, they had been looking for a new location for at least 10 years, wanting both more space, and to be located not in the rarified neighborhoods of university professors and students, but in the

more racially and economically diverse areas near downtown. That year, they found a school campus, purchased it, and began renovating. Last I was there they had a fabulous sanctuary, a warm and well-windowed social area, and plenty of classrooms for all kinds of activities and groups.

In South Carolina, where I served as an interim minister, the congregation had two buildings - a small building with a minister's office/meeting room and a small sanctuary, plus a separate larger building for coffee hour, social gatherings, and workshops. Yes, people traveled from one building to the other after the service. While I was there, a team designed a renovation of the larger building, to make it the new sanctuary, with more space and light and beauty and accessible restrooms. Construction was well underway as I finished my time there.

I can claim no credit for the success of any of those building efforts, other than being part of supporting them and supporting congregational life in general, but I take from them the experience of working with and within congregations that had to dance and wrestle and chew on and talk about questions around needs, and the future, and who they were serving and wanted to serve, congregations who navigated varying levels of comfort with thinking or talking about money, different levels of confidence in getting enough money, and differences in confidence that any of these projects could or should be taken on at all.

In every one of those instances there were people who didn't want to make any changes. In every one of those congregations there were people who worried that the congregation couldn't afford it. In each case that involved moving, there were people who didn't want to leave the neighborhood.

In every one, there was also a core group of people who saw possibilities and who weren't daunted by the task. Each required people who could sort out the details as well as people to help everyone stay grounded in realistic expectations.

Each required people who were willing to say, "Let's see what we can do," and, people to ask the hard questions, and eventually people to say, "We can do this!" And each required people who were able to articulate why it was important and why it mattered.

Among my other take-aways from that set of experiences are these:

- that more is possible than many people think at first
- that the process of simply asking the questions and exploring the possibilities opens up possibilities – and ideas and imagination and vision
- That a thorough and transparent and engaged process is vital – and energizing, if not always perfectly smooth.
- That some people in a group will not ever be comfortable with the risk that comes with change or a leap.
- That concrete information really supports the journey.
- That a heart-centered vision for "why" is central.

There are people here who have been dreaming and scheming for more or better-serving space for years, and there are people who are most comfortable staying right here with everything just as it is.

I so appreciate the skill, the thoughtfulness, the deep information gathering and transparency that this Facilities Exploration Committee is bringing, including in today's conversation.

Kay Crider, the consultant who came and worked with the congregation a few years ago, explained to us that in her experience, once a congregation gathers all the information and really explores all the options and what's possible for each path, a facilities decision invariably becomes clear. That's my hope for this process - that when this congregation knows as much as it can reasonably know about the possibilities, that the decision will become clear.

Now, I know, the thing is that we're living through and into unprecedented times. It's so difficult to know what to plan for next week and in our lives in general. How does one know what this congregation will need, or be, or become down the road. Shouldn't we just wait and see? Why are we doing this now, we're still finding trying to find our way back together from pandemic solitude. Heck, the minister is about to go on sabbatical!

I get the impulse.

And I have few responses.

1. Especially now, I think that the amount of sureness that some of us will want is going to remain perpetually out of reach. As soon as we think we're clear about one moment, the target of sureness will have moved out farther already. That was actually true when each of those congregation's I named was making their decisions. They had to look out and imagine as best they could and then go for it, without an absolute guarantee. It's a dynamic that is turned up a notch - or two - now, but it's not new.

I shared once the story of the Let's Have a Baby Speech. That first UU congregation I joined wanted to have their own building. They were lay-led and had no minister. The people they consulted in the larger UU Association told them that if they wanted a building, to get a minister. They balked at that, for multiple reasons. And worried about affording it. They didn't feel ready.

At a key decision-making meeting, one of the leaders of the church got up and said something to the effect of, if couples waited until they felt ready to have children, many couples would never have children. Not all of us are going to feel ready to move ahead, she said, but we can do this. Let's have a baby!

No matter what decision this facilities exploration process leads to, other than doing absolutely nothing, it's going to take imagination and some leap of faith into what we cannot know for certain. People who can hold that kind of imagination are a great gift.

2. This information gathering and option exploring takes time and so it has to start well ahead of any action. Thoroughly exploring the options as this congregation is doing now, puts this congregation in a great place to decide and take action responsibly and more nimbly when the time comes, no matter when and what that will be.
3. I come from a midwestern farm background that says that you make do, creatively, with what you've got. That tends to be my approach in life, and while it serves me well much of the time, it also means that I sometimes don't reach for what I really want or what I really need. When I pause for a moment and look around here, I'm very aware that keeping things just as they are has already long been limiting the congregation.
  - a. A good half a dozen times I've met someone out at a community event, who, when they learn who I am, has explained to me that they had tried to come to a service – once. That they had driven around for 10 or 15 minutes, unable to find a parking space, and so had finally gone home - or out for breakfast - and never tried again. Those are just the folks I happen to have encountered and who made a point of saying something.
  - b. Early in my time with you, there was a child in a motorized wheelchair, when the time for children to connect and learn was held, as it is now, upstairs, with no elevator to get up there, and stairs that would themselves not meet current safety codes. It's a barrier for many adults as well, of course, and makes a good portion of the space here unavailable.
  - c. Pre-pandemic, even with two services, our first service was often more than full. Even now, in November one Sunday we had 89 people in the room and 49 sites signed in via Zoom. And while technically we can fit a certain number of chairs in the room, and while code allows a certain number of people in the room, none of our seating arrangements allows truly safe aisles. None. Many Sundays I eye one of our beloved members who uses a wheelchair and in my mind I map out how that person might get to the front for joys and sorrows or some other ritual. Usually not easily, if at all. Not to mention that I also map out in my mind how that person could possibly get out in an emergency. Beyond the simple comfort levels of many of us, there are ethical needs to look at such limits.

There are numerous other issues that you have raised or that will be raised, so I won't say any more there.

I will say that we owe tremendous gratitude to the people who envisioned and gave and risked – who took a huge leap of faith - some of whom put up their own homes as collateral, to get this building years ago, to those who've improved and cared for and tended it since, and to you whose pledges paid for it over time. What a tremendous gift and asset. Owning a building is a fortunate place to be at this point.

AND... now, after all these years, with the growth of the congregation and a growth in our awareness, it's important to know that there are numerous aspects of this space that exert a

quiet and real limit not only on what the congregation can do for those who are already here, but also a quiet and real limit on who can find a home here, no matter how much they need it.

If you were here last week for the Cider Sunday service, you know that there were a number of people here for the first time, 4 or 5 of whom – 4 or 5 who are young by the congregation's standards - stood up and spoke courageously in the service, giving a small glimpse of just how many people who are not here yet need this community.

I'll close with this:

One of the questions I take with me into sabbatical/renewal time is, in shorthand, "Why church? – Why religious community?"

Despite the rapid decline in participation in many mainstream religious institutions, my question isn't "Whether church?" but rather, "Why church." Why this religious community, now, and for what's next? What does it need to be and to offer?"

After a couple years of pandemic life, there is so much that is unsure and so much that's shifting, but the importance of community - multi-generational community centered around life-serving values, human connection, and personal spiritual and emotional groundedness - feels stronger than ever to me.

What exact shape it will take down the road isn't at all clear, but now is what we've got to work with, and I believe that the immediate work is to focus on what will point us from here *toward* there, as best we can imagine it.

To draw on Lynn Ungar's wisdom:

Use the strong warp threads left by those who have gone before, and pick up the weft, the colored threads that you use now to keep weaving, threads that build the bright pattern of this community's life into what's next.

Yes, some threads may tangle or knot or fray and the flaws will show. Oh well, let's tuck in the ends as best we can.

This is not the time to stop our weaving.

This is the time to be weaving anew.

So much is pulling at the great design.

I look forward to supporting you in that weaving, whatever it will be.