

Walking Together
May 20, 2007, UUCG
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There is an old joke about how UU's respond to the question about what it is we stand for...where WE SAY, we don't stand for anything, we move!

Hearing stories about the 50+ year history of UUCG, one could say this congregation has taken that quip quite literally!

Beginning as a small group of transplanted Unitarians who came here because this is where their jobs came, UUCG moved around from place to place quite a lot before finding a home in this building some twelve years ago. I have heard that many of you expect that in another few years another move will happen.

Some of you served on a task force not long ago that envisioned a move to a new building where the needs of this growing congregation would be better served and where Uuism would stand out in Greenville even more than it does now.

Perhaps in a new building with more space for youth, UUCG would attract a greater share of the families with young children who are moving to this thriving region every day. Perhaps in a new building with accessible space for seniors to gather and to share their combined experience and wisdom... renewed energy would come forth to transform the Greenville community so it better provides for those whose needs are not now being adequately met . Perhaps in a new building, the space itself would convey to those who pass by what Uuism in Greenville stands for.

In the meantime, in this location walls get moved and space is created as needs change and numbers grow.

This congregation has never stood still. People have come and gone. Needs and preferences have changed. This congregation has made adjustments and rearrangements and reinvented itself when it has needed to.

Even though there are visions for a bigger, better space, most of you would probably agree that it is not the particular place that you occupy at any given

time...that defines who or what this congregation is...what it "stands" for...rather that is to be found in the "nature" of the people who choose to be here.

Here are some of the things I have learned about your "nature" so far:

You are a congregation that values fellowship; that values being together (especially eating together). You value being a part of each other's lives. When I have heard many of you say that there has been some degree of frustration with break downs in "communications", I know it is the kind of folks who care about being included that express concern about being left out. Concern with communications tells me that this is a congregation that wants to do things together!

You are a congregation that welcomes many differing spiritual expressions. From agnostic to pagan, from Christian to Buddhist to Jewish, from secular humanist to religious humanist, there are many paths under this one roof. There is diversity in age, life-style choices, family configurations, occupations, backgrounds...

In many ways UUCG reflects the diversity that one finds in greater Greenville. The native East Carolinian sits next to the transplanted Northerner, or someone from out west. Those who value everything new, walk along side those who treasure what is old. Those who have been richly rewarded economically sit next to, and often live next to those who struggle to make ends meet. A lot of the economic and educational diversity I have seen in Greenville, I see in this church.

I also see the usual mixture of personality types; there are those who value a quiet, reflective, steady progressiveness.... walking along side those who are boisterous, opinionated and restless. There is a lot of difference under this one roof...

...and there is a lot of sameness...

Many UU's, particularly those in the Bible Belt, like to believe that their UU space offers shelter from overly zealous evangelicalism "out there" that preaches that there is only one way to be "saved". We like to believe that our

congregations offer sanctuary from what can be, not just annoying, but dangerous.. Yet, sometimes we struggle to create places that are truly safe from the harm that we can inflict on each other.

This congregation attracts people who value freedom, freedom of thought, freedom of worship, freedom of behavior, perhaps even freedom from an obligation to responsible, caring behavior.

You want this to be a place where you can be fully who you are. Where you can relax, or be in charge! Where you can be known and appreciated, find friends, even partners, or stay on the periphery for a while and still be valued.

I see a church where individuals can be intellectually stimulated, comforted, companioned, inspired to social action, where individuals can lead, follow or just sit. I see a group that acts in solidarity with those who are needy, that has acted in alliance with other faith communities to accomplish worthy, tangible goals.

I have read your mission statement, which is full of beautiful, inspiring words. I have heard your board recite their covenant to each other. I know there are those among you have thought long and hard about who you are and what your purposes are and have arrived at statements that, like the principles and purposes, capture “for a time” who you are and where you mean to be going with each other.

As good UU’s, I know many of you know that no statement, or principle, or particular interpretation of history or vision of the future, no current policy is capable of capturing the best or the only way of doing things for all time. Yet some have done the “word-smith-ing” to try and capture a combined sense of this community’s identity that can tell new comers who you are...or wish to be...

My partner and I have been spending this week looking for a place to live. We have been circling and circling the neighborhoods of Greenville. The abundance of potential places to live presents an almost overwhelming variety of choice. There have been moments when we longed for someone to just tell us what house and what neighborhood to pick! Overwhelmed with too many options, too many choices, again and again, we had to think about what it was that we really wanted and how might the variety of options before us meet our most

important needs. “We could do this” or “We could do that” or “If we do this then that may happen, but not this” ... So much to think about and to process...

As the week ended, we were grounded by the perspective that it’s just a house, that a house by itself doesn’t tell us or others what we “stand for”. We reminded ourselves that our “identity” as a couple is found in how we relate to each other, not in the particular home we choose to live in. The nature of our relationship may be reflected in the choices we make, yet over and over again, we have to do the work of re-orient ourselves to our commitment to “walk together in the ways of affection” as we shuffle through all the choices, and try to pick just one home, which we will make our own for a time.

Our Unitarian Universalists forebears, long ago promised to walk together. They believed that “truth” was continuously being revealed and that human beings were always going to be about the business of discerning “truth”. They did not pledge themselves to a common creed, or give their allegiance to any dogma or particular doctrine.

What they promised each other, and what we still promise each other as UU’s, is to walk together, to keep moving...to keep discovering...how to give this life meaning and purpose... ...while walking together in the ways of affection, in love.

I have shared a lot of things I see about this congregation. But mostly what I see and hear and feel, is that this is a congregation is mostly driven by and frustrated by the “ways of affection”.

I believe that this is how it should be!

In my way of viewing this faith, it isn’t what we stand for, what slogan or mission statement we hang on the door... the essence of who we are is in how we walk together in the ways of love.

Our nature, is to be found in how we treat each other, how we respect each other, how we reveal ourselves to each other, how we learn from each other, what we promise to be for each other. This UU faith does take stands, plenty of them! But

what we stand for grows out of what we discover about how to be in loving relationship with each other.

I believe that you cannot be a UU by yourself. You cannot be a UU by yourself in the closet, in the library, or in the woods. To be a UU, you must be in community with other UU's. This congregation knows that. You have known it since the early 50's when 5-10 people gathered in a garage, just to be with each other. You know it now; when you sense that soon this place will not be big enough for all those who will want to be where you are.

What I have seen and heard this past week is a congregation full of emotion, where feelings, more than intellect, rules. You are proud of being a warm and welcoming community. You are frustrated when lines of communication are non-existent or break down. You are crushed when trust is broken. But you have, over and over again, stayed together, sorted through the options, and moved forward again.

I see a congregation that is proud of what it has done well.

I see a congregation that wants to trust...each other...and a new minister.

I see a congregation that is eager to trust a search committee that spend long hours together, ...eating, joking, communicating, sorting through options, building relationships, dealing with personality differences...some search committee members will fade from view for a while, some will emerge as new leadership, some will continue to do what they've always done...All care deeply for the future of this congregation.

I do, too. I am eager to be with you to join with you as we walk together in the ways of affection.

May it be so.