

Justice, equity and compassion: Seeking out those who have been turned away.
UUCG, November 25, 2007
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Last winter, as I was studying several congregations that were looking for new ministers, I remember being very attracted to the words of your mission statement.

It is printed on the back of your order of service:

We, the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Greenville,
united in our diversity,
Covenant with one another to search,
to serve, to grow and to love.
We seek out those who have been turned away,
we embrace those, whose spiritual path
has been isolated,
we strengthen ourselves to comfort the suffering;
we share with our children our commitment to a more just
and compassionate society.

I remember as I was searching for the right congregation to partner with... being especially moved by the line in your mission statement that says; "We seek out those who have been turned away."

It has been some time ago now, but I haven't forgotten that for a period in my life that lasted for decades, I was turned away, "in exile" from any meaningful faith community where I could be whole. During those years, it would have been a dream come true to have been sought out, for a faith community come looking for me. I was impressed that this congregation at some point had created and endorsed these words that so eloquently lift up what it means to do justice work.

I remember thinking; " I want to be with a congregation like this!"
At some point you must have carefully thought about your obligation, your mission to those who have been turned away. At some point the members of this congregation made a promise to seek out and be in solidarity with those who have been marginalized.

I have asked a few questions, but I don't claim to know all the details of the creation of UUCG's mission statement. I suspect it may have been written during or after this congregation reached out to be with the farm workers affected by Hurricane Floyd who had been left out of the government's system of

care. I can imagine that must have been a time, when what it really means to do justice work became very clear; when words and deeds came into close alignment.

I admit I am the kind of person who looks for how words and actions line up!

I have wondered how many of this congregation's current members are aware of, or "own", this mission statement. It is "out there", printed every week on the order of service and repeated on the website. I read it and I know there are others who are seeking a spiritual home who read it. It tells others who you promise to be...as a congregation...in this time and space.

Are you aware you are making *this* promise?

I believe that the process of "aligning" promise to practice, of word to deed and deed to word, is a constant quest. We are never done with it. It is a constant process to get the wording of our promises in good alignment with our practices; to get our practice in line with our words.

Being a former mechanic, I know that there is no such thing as a "perfect", lifetime alignment. Just like the alignment on a vehicle, as soon as you leave the bay, some bump is going to come along, or you are going to encounter something that you hadn't rolled over before. Something that had been on the periphery will come up and disturb that "perfect" alignment. Someone just may come along and interpret your words in ways you hadn't thought of!

Individual congregations, businesses, non-profit organizations all go through the process of creating "mission" statements. These statements are meant to answer the question; "why does this specific group exist?" They help groups to name their particular focus and once created they can help the group choose what they will do. Mission statements almost always are made public, put out there for others to get a clue about why you exist. Once made public, mission statements will be used to measure your "performance".

When a mission statement is created or revised in a UU congregation the wording and the acceptance of the wording is done in a democratic fashion and is affirmed by a majority vote of the congregation's members. It is a creative time when congregations try to put into words what they have done and what they hope to do. If the process has been done well, everyone leaves knowing with more clarity who they are and what they are about. Once your statement goes

public, it is not only open to interpretation; it also becomes a way to measure what you do against what you said you would do!

It is not uncommon for congregations to periodically revisit and reformulate their mission statements. Not so much because they haven't done what the mission statement says they will do, but because those members who make up a congregation change over time. The words that worked for the members of this congregation when an older mission statement was created may no longer say what the current members now wish to say now about why they exist. When there is no longer a majority ownership of a mission statement; it is time to revisit the process.

It is clear to me that even though UU's don't have a set body of scripture, we love words! We love tweaking them and finding new ways to say what we are trying to say. Even the seven principles that our entire Association of congregations holds as a common set of values went through a democratic process in their creation and acceptance. The UUA is in the process of a mandated reflection upon and possible revision of the Seven Principles. We will engage in that process in January.

We are constantly looking at our "words". Do they still say what we mean to say? Do they come into alignment with what we do?

All current UU congregations who associate with one another, in one way or another have agreed to affirm and support the seven principles as they are now written.

This congregation uses the seven principles in its Bylaws in order to state its purpose as a corporate entity. UUCG asks those who want to be members here to affirm that they are in sympathy with the seven principles.

If the wording of the principles changes, our bylaws could change.

The point is we try to stay open to change. We try to be real in knowing that we will encounter bumps along the road and that those bumps will open us to look for new ways to set our alignment between our words and our deeds. This openness to fresh words that can say what we mean to say is part of what makes our words organic rather than "dogmatic".

None of our words, not the seven principles, not this congregation's mission statement, are dogma's that have come down from on high, or that will exist for all time! Rather they are human creations that attempt to say in the best words we could find at the time why we exist and who we promise to be.

I read that you promise to seek out those who have been turned away and I was thrilled.

These wonderful words reflect the second principle; "justice, equity and compassion in human relations" and they say how this congregation does justice work.

You seek out those who have been turned away...

I remember being invisible in and to faith communities that promised to know me and to love me. I have memories of faith communities that claimed to be my spiritual home that left my reality out when "how things are" was described or proclaimed.

I have memories of being turned away. I remember longing to be with a group that would choose to be in solidarity with me, that would welcome all of me, and that would "identify" with the marginalized, like me.

I have been there. I know what it means to be sought out. I am impressed and thankful that this congregation has chosen to be intentional about seeking out the marginalized in this community. For decades, UUCG has reached out to those who are humanists, to those who practice a world religion that is far from the mainstream in Greenville, to pagans, to the un-churched, to those who have been wounded or turned off by the faith of their childhood, to young UU's on campus. UUCG has reached out to immigrant farm workers, to those who are hungry, to those who need shelter, to needy children, to those are without health insurance, to those who are differently-abled, to those who suffer from mental or physical illness. UUCG has reached out to those whose gender and sexual orientations are different from the mainstream, whose families are different. UUCG has reached out to those who care about the environment and who care about the rights of animals. UUCG has reached out to Hispanics and blacks, and all those who are marginalized in this community.

Seeking out the marginalized can be both exhilarating and exhausting. Your mission statement also says “we will strengthen ourselves to comfort the suffering”.

We do that by finding the unity in our diversity, in worship, in organizing ourselves according to a democratic process, in study, in focused social action, in caring. We strengthen ourselves when we listen to each other’s fears, each other’s passions, each other’s search for wholeness and in so doing find a new alignment with each other. We strengthen ourselves to reach out to those who have been turned away, because we know that by expanding who we are we, by identifying with the marginalized we will be creating a more “just and compassionate society”.

We have been, and we will be “fit” for this work.