

YEAR 3—COVID 19
The Road Ahead for the Church

It has been quite a ride over the last couple of years. And the question for today is, where we are going from here? I will be with you until the end of June, and then I will be retiring and moving to Tucson to be closer to my kids. When I leave, there may be a gap of a few weeks, then there should be an Interim Minister for a couple of years before you complete your search for the next settled Minister. Before I leave, I am hoping that things will have settled down with the Pandemic and that more of our members and friends will feel comfortable returning to in-person worship experiences and gatherings at the church. As a congregation, you are in a better place than many churches since you have no debt on the buildings and they are in reasonably good shape. We still are struggling to stay in touch with many members and friends and we continue to need volunteers to pass along information. The Board and several groups have been meeting over zoom, which has certainly helped with continuity. The financial situation of the church is not bad. As the cost of everything increases, there will be a need for pledge increases, but again the situation is not bad considering all that has happened in the world in the last couple of years.

Even more important than the church buildings and finances, is the question of the church's mission moving forward. How will First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton help people deal with the world that now exists and the challenges of the future? Our nation is more divided politically than ever before in many of our lifetimes. The effects of climate change in fires and drought, floods and storms are becoming far more impactful in people's lives. The chasm continues to grow between rich and poor as well as between white and black, privileged and impoverished, educated and preferentially ignorant. This is not the world many of us imagined for the 21st Century. As a congregation of mostly older, retired, white professionals, we have some resources and perhaps more than many others, but few of us feel that confident of the future for ourselves, our families, or the world. It takes far more effort than it should to find the hope for tomorrow.

Our religion is essentially hopeful in a realistic, scientific, well-grounded yet still spiritual way. Many of us find connections to the cycles of Earth in ways similar to Pagan traditions. Others of us draw inspiration from our Judeo-Christian roots. Still others find strength and courage and wisdom within Humanism or Buddhism. Our inclusiveness and variety is probably our greatest strength of all. We have not always been as welcoming as we might be, but there is a place in our midst for almost everyone who would like to walk with us. We also witness to and facilitate the process of change as we respond to the world around us. Some of us may drag our feet at times, but we are a religious tradition that is continuously moving and changing. And that better prepares us for the changing world we face today.

We may not have all the answers or at times any answers, but we are open to ideas, respectful of other persons, and we are aware of the changes going on around us. Stockton is one of the most diverse cities in America, which gives us each an opportunity to better understand other cultures and the struggles of people different from ourselves.

The Covid-19 Pandemic is a worldwide problem whose scope seems to eclipse the history of other Pandemics while also foreshadowing future ones. Many nations have been able to forge a more unified response, but the United States and a few other Western Democracies seem to have become more divided than ever due to strong anti-vax parties. These groups seem mostly to be religiously conservative and largely anti-science. Their greatest impact has been to extend the Pandemic by preventing herd immunity levels to be reached. In this country, the anti-vaxxers gained early support from Trump in his general effort to disrupt society. They seemingly continue to believe they have Trump's support, though evidence exists that he is fully vaccinated.

One of the greatest challenges of the next few years will be to bridge the differences between parties and groups in American society. Analogies could be drawn to the unifying challenges to our way of life during the World Wars and the Spanish Flu Pandemic, but the combined challenge of the Covid-19 Pandemic and Climate Change may well go beyond the efforts called forth in those times. Science has been warning us for decades that coming changes in climate can be devastating, threatening human existence as we know it.

Even in the face of intensified storms, drought, floods, and fires, millions of people are still denying and disbelieving. Millions in our country would rather believe the lies of Trump than the evidence of their own eyes and a surprisingly widely shared scientific consensus. And even when they may begin to show openings to the evidence, they often turn to their religion in a belief that God will step in to save all the believers. The pairing of religious and political blind faith and naivete is a dangerous mixture when it happens in a nation with so many nuclear weapons, and so many powerfully connected corporations, and so many self-serving wealthy individuals. As voting rights of minorities are eroded in dozens of states, the prospects for solving any number of problems affecting hundreds of millions of people in this country are circling the drain.

Another challenge for churches is declining membership and attendance. Few congregations are growing today, especially in the midst of the Covid Pandemic, but there are indicators that even evangelical churches are failing to attract many younger members as both modern science and modern life fail to support the existing models of church. Younger families often are engaged in sports events and other programs on Sunday while older generations are less convinced of the meaning and power of religious teachings which are more and more at odds with reality.

When I came into Unitarian Universalism, it was in large part because it offered a “Rational” religion, as opposed to the irrationality of so many other religious traditions. In the first 2 decades of my UUism, I found the rationality of UUism to be one of the most widely shared reasons people supported the movement and one of its greatest draws for me, as well. The other widely shared reason was the inclusiveness, the welcome to practitioners of various religions as well as humanists, atheists, and agnostics. For many years now, liberal Christianity has had an increasing influence in UUism, as has a social justice commitment to promote the interests of and leadership by blacks, women, LGBTQ+ persons, and other minorities. In the last few years, I have seen an effort to minimize the influence and effectively push out humanists, atheists, and agnostics, especially older straight white males, from leadership and the movement. I am a bit sensitive to this as an older, straight, essentially agnostic, humanistic, white male. Of course, in order to transition to put more blacks in leadership, whites had to go, and yet the process has had flaws.

Every revolution by necessity pushes out the old order, and the revolution within Unitarian Universalism is no exception. I have always believed in shared leadership among differing racial and gender groups, and I totally accept that white males have had too much power for far too long. And yet, I thought I would still have a place in this movement. Now I am not feeling that I am part of the future of the movement, more that my time has passed. Among other things, that makes it harder for me to assess what will happen in the future of the movement as well as this congregation.

In the last few years, the rowdy dialogue and debate that typified this movement for much of the 20th Century has largely been quashed in order to protect the sensitivities of those who have been harmed and abused emotionally within a system that tended to listen to the loudest voices rather than listening to all voices. There is little doubt that greater balance and inclusiveness was needed, but some of the changes being made may also limit the attractiveness of the movement to those who are now being told essentially to sit down and shut up! Whether the movement will succeed in attracting more minority persons is still unclear. Narrowing the acceptable range of beliefs to a version of liberal Christianity light is almost surely destined to fail, but will there be enough room for others and will they be welcomed?

The structures of the Unitarian Universalist movement have already changed significantly with the disbanding of the Districts in favor of Regions closely supervised by the UUA in Boston. The effort to bring unanimity of practice if not yet beliefs to all UU Franchises may or may not succeed in increasing membership and financial support. So far it has resulted in far fewer opportunities for UUs to meet and work with each other, even allowing for the impact of the Pandemic.

Hopefully we will see some success in making the Pandemic into something more manageable by the wider spread of the Omicron Variant. Between those vaccinated and those getting Covid, we may yet reach some level of herd immunity or at least the point where periodic vaccinations will keep it at bay. That would allow life to return to something like what was normal before Covid-19. The use of masks will probably remain a good idea for the foreseeable future, however.

The future for UUism and this congregation is hard to foretell. It will surely depend upon the efforts of many persons. For the size of our movement, UUs have often been world changers, and I hope that we will continue to make a positive difference in this community and across the US. Perhaps the best is yet to come!

There are many decisions yet to come. Within the congregation, you will still make many of your own decisions about what happens, at least in the near future. The Board will address matters around the safety of meeting next week and will decide when it is safe to restart Coffee Hours. Further down the road, in a couple of years, you will select your next settled Minister who will help you deal with the changes in the Movement.

So what is the future that you foresee for this congregation and UUism? What are your thoughts about it? I will bring the mic around.

I hope that Unitarian Universalism and this congregation will remain open to all persons of good will who wish to be involved, including people of any shape, size, color, gender, national or planetary background, belief or not in any deity. We each will have choices to make to support that openness for the future or not. As in the future of Democracy in our Nation, we will have to practice staying engaged and making our voice and vote matter. We each have a role to play in helping shape the future of this congregation and the Movement. As we each have found what we needed here in Unitarian Universalism, it is up to us to keep this movement open to those who need it most. The future really is in our hands! May we keep the future open & bright!

So May it Always Be!

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!