

Fran Sermon Mission 2007.01.21.doc

Rev. Fran Dearman Sermon January 21st, 2007, Anchorage Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

“Mission: A Sermon for the Installation of the 2007 Board of Trustees:

[With thanks to Mindy Willis for transcription]

Good Morning.

Let’s look at this word “Mission”.

When I hear the word, mission, I think of a #8 bus. Long ago and far away, back in the mid-60s in my hometown, our youth group met on Thursday evenings. And so I would take the bus downtown and transfer to the #8, which was named “Outer Wharf”. We left behind the tidy yacht basin outside the Empress Hotel. We left behind the stylish terminals of the passenger ferries in the Inner Harbor. The Outer Wharf bus took us beyond that safe city core, out to the working harbor, out to Fisherman’s Wharf, the Coast Guard Station, and the deep water berths of the great ocean freighters.

The Outer Wharf bus took us out to the exciting, romantic, industrial working harbor where hammers rang on iron and welders’ flaming torches flashed forth. And as I stepped off the #8 bus, I would see right before me the words carved deep in the cornerstone of our fellowship hall that our meetinghouse had been built in 1941 as a mission to seamen. Here, merchant sailors waiting for their next vessel could find a clean bed, a hot meal, and refuge from the distractions that plague poor sailor men: fast women, slow horses, and the demon rum.

Twenty years later, that wartime building, created as a mission of hospitality to mariners, had become home to a Unitarian fellowship. Its new mission was to sustain our religious community. In time, our congregation’s mission outgrew that building and we moved to larger quarters and larger missions.

Over time, we all change. Our dreams and hopes and visions change. Our sense of mission changes, and the structures that express and sustain that mission change also.

There are layers upon layers in this matter of thinking about missions. Perhaps you have an image in your own mind of some mission. We speak of religious missions, and diplomatic missions. We speak of missions as undertakings, and as the structure and people that undertake them. The Star Ship Enterprise had a mission – “to boldly go where no one has gone before”. What does mission mean to you?

Organizations, including religious denominations, set great store by mission statements. Systems theorists see the mission statement as a unifying focus that connects various related groups through mutual commitment to a common mission, so that diverse programs flourish in unity through mutual

commitment to a shared mission. A clear mission statement unites and overpowers the diverse groups gathered under its umbrella.

Mission statements typically engage
who we are,
why we are here,
what we value,
how we walk together,
and to what end.

These are profoundly religious and moral questions.

We could expect a congregation's true mission to be revealed by the greatest focus of its energies. When a mission statement is articulated, it is born in time and circumstance. By the passing of time it will need to be re-addressed.

I have looked at various examples, and I notice that the larger the congregation, the shorter the mission statement.

Juneau UUs have a small fellowship. Here is their mission statement: "The mission of the Juneau Unitarian Universalist Fellowship is to be a spiritual home for all people who are engaged in a search for truth and meaning. We are a liberal religious community which nourishes personal growth through worship, fellowship, education, celebration and service. Our actions extend from our Unitarian Universalist principles and beliefs."

A larger church, in New York City, has this: "Our Mission at The Community Church of New York Unitarian Universalist is to grow as a caring, justice-making, anti-racist, diverse, spiritual community."

[We're told the mission statement for UUs in Tulsa is just two words: "Civilizing Tulsa."]

Mission statements that go beyond our own skin and out into the world empower a congregational social justice program, especially where they encourage an all-church project. An all-church project would be a simultaneous engagement by the many elements within the congregation on one topic, for example, environmental issues.

We lose a lot when we grow. We lose the old intimacy. But we gain with growth also. Greater numbers and resources bring us greater power to affect the world outside, and send our values beyond our own walls. Over time, mission statements change to reflect changes in focus and possibility. And social justice projects grow out of that. Mission statements can energize our congregation and inspire us to action.

What is the role of mission in our religious community?

Our sense of mission is grounded in our evolving faith tradition. It emerges from our human nature. It calls us to treat others as human moral agents, like ourselves.

Mission is grounded in our 450 years of UU tradition. Our Unitarian spiritual ancestors taught that one god holds all of us. Whatever the holy is, it is big enough to embrace us all. Our Universalist forebears taught that all are precious; all are worthy to be held in that broad embrace. There is a profound equity here. All people are our brothers and sisters. In our own time we might extend that circle of care to embrace all creatures, even to embrace the earth itself. And so, all are our neighbors.

Our rational radical reform religious heritage also recognized the right to private judgment. Faith is personal, individual. Faith is expressed, personally and in community, through works and good deeds of caring. In the long argument between faith and works, the UU tradition tends to put its energies into good works. Faith is personal. Good work – mission – is public. Faith without works is dead.

Finally, I would like to think that our religious tradition teaches us to value our neighbor as ourselves. The social reformers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries took this to heart, trying to humanize the faceless cities that grew out of the industrial revolution.

Humanist thinkers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reminded us that our high aspirations have no hands but our own, to better the human condition. [Let us lift up our beautiful hands and look at them. These are the only hands God has.]

Our present awareness of the world, as with the inconvenient truth of global warming, reminds us of our mutual dependence in the interconnected web.

It is also very human to want to help our neighbors and heal the world.

Intellectually, we can recognize that we are only as free and secure as others are. When we look at another's misfortune we might remember, there but for fortune go you and go I.

Emotionally, we can become aware of what literally moves us, as body mind and spirit come together. Have you suddenly become aware that someone you loved was about to close their hand in a car door? We reach out. Our stomachs clench in anticipation of their pain. Emotion is the thing that moves us. Our empathy calls us to recognize the dis-ease of another. Our very bodies, in their responses call us to care for our neighbor as ourselves.

Mission is empowering and creative. Mission is hopeful. Purpose is hope. Mission might even be fun. We like it. We've been doing it for years. This fellowship has longstanding links with such agencies as 4As (Alaska Aids Assistance Association), among others. A sense of mission brought us civil rights and Anchorage Town Square. A sense of mission is going to roll back global warming, and it can't start too soon. We need a big new roof here, broad enough to shelter all of us beneath it, broad enough to serve as a mission to our city. Buildings create space that fosters mission to the community.

There is a caveat here, a warning lest we go astray. We are human. We bring our human passions into all we do.

Each January, for the past five years, these walls have heard read aloud Martin Luther King's Letter from Birmingham City Jail. King makes two points I would call to our attention. First, the myth of time: time by itself does not heal or bring change; things change because we make things happen. Second, what King called purification: as the civil rights activists prepared for concerted action, they undertook a time of mindful preparation in which to acknowledge and engage personal issues and issues of power, so that they might bring their best selves to the encounter.) We are human. We each bring ourselves, our histories, our passions, to each encounter. Purification is necessary to bring our best selves forward, so that we might act thoughtfully, from love, and from learning, and be mindful of unintended consequences.

Dreaming the future takes time and being mindful in the present. It takes optimism and love and courage. Mission dares to hope.

Some missions are simple, clear, and outstanding, like Father Damien's mission to the lepers on Molokai'i.

Other missions are less dramatic, unfolding day-by-day, week-by-week. And before you know it, decades have gone by, and out of countless moments, some significant change has happened, like votes for women, or the eradication of small pox.

I believe we are drawn to commit ourselves to mission because a commitment to help heal the world is hopeful and purposeful and empowering.

I believe this fellowship has grown and changed since the last mission statement. I believe it is time for a new statement, a shorter one, perhaps. I would look for a mission statement that opens us to greater focus in our commitment to social justice. I know we can do this; we've sustained a commitment to the 4A's luncheon for years.

We've done social justice work before. I believe it's timely that we should be more intentional about social justice as a fellowship. I believe we could be more effective, focusing our energies on one "all-church project". Something to think about. We have a Social Justice Committee (invite them to stand).

In conclusion, my challenge to this new board, and to us all, is to keep us talking to one another. I believe our best selves call us to think beyond ourselves and out into the world. I believe we are called to do social justice work as a whole congregation, not just the valiant few of the Social Justice Committee and the Alliance.

I call us to go beyond the known into the future.

Let us do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with one another as we do so.

FD/mw