

**“The State of the Church Address”**  
**© 2009 Rev. Wendy L. Bell**  
**Harvard Unitarian Universalist Church**  
**Harvard, Massachusetts**  
**February 8, 2009**

Eight years ago, when I was serving as the interim minister of the UU church in Rockport, MA, I shared with the congregation what I called a “state of the church address.” It was my opportunity to share with them from my perspective, how I thought things were going for them during their year of transition, and to note their many accomplishments.

Since that time, I’ve noticed that more and more ministers of many different religious faiths are starting to make it an annual tradition to present such an address. These have become regular opportunities not only to report on the current state of the church, but also and especially to share a vision of the church’s future and a sense of what the church is called to be and do.

In seven and a half years, I don’t remember ever having done such a thing here, so I figure it’s time. And I’d like to start, perhaps not surprisingly, by saying that I believe the state of the church is strong. I believe this based not on numbers – like how many members we have or how much money we have raised for this or that or how many programs or committees are active.

No, I believe it based on our fruits. Strong, healthy congregations – like strong, healthy trees – bear good fruits. When the spirit of a congregation is fundamentally vibrant, generous, hopeful, joyful, compassionate, grateful, patient, and persistent...the congregation is doing well.

That is my experience of this congregation as evidenced by many possible examples; but let me share three with you.

First is the example of a woman who comes to church faithfully, although irregularly, who returned recently after some time away and spoke to me of the positive spirit she feels here every time she comes. This place is alive and buzzing. It is friendly. It is welcoming. It is exciting. She is not the only one to have noticed it. Newcomers report the same thing more often than not. This is one of the fruits of a strong church.

My second example of the good fruits by which I know this place to be strong and healthy is the new office and meeting space upstairs behind this wall, which I hope most of you have had a chance to see by now - not the space itself, but the process by which we’ve gotten it.

You may remember that our original plans for the new Fellowship Building included moving the offices over there so that the staff and I could work together in the same space, which we felt would have all sorts of benefits. But there were some members of the congregation who raised important concerns, particularly about the minister’s office leaving this building.

For a little while we were stumped. It felt like we were at an impasse. It seemed like someone was certain to be disappointed. But we listened to the concerns carefully, we persisted, and we found a solution, which seems to have met all kinds of needs. Those capacities - to share concerns honestly, to listen to concerns thoughtfully, to persist in looking for a win-win solution, and then to make it happen, on time and on budget – those capacities are among the hallmarks of a strong and healthy church.

And my third example involves the congregational meeting that was held last week, and the approval of the new building design and, in particular, the vote of confidence as to how the project would be financed. What has been evident throughout this long process of replacing the Fellowship Building is a profound willingness of leaders to work hard, to address concerns, and to be reliable stewards of the congregation's time and energy and money; and an equally profound willingness of the rest of us to trust our leaders and their recommendations, not blindly, but with assurance and confidence. That kind of willingness, both to lead and to trust, and the kind of confidence that you have in one another, these are more good fruits.

That is not to deny that we face challenges – we do. As a congregation we have experienced the effects of the flagging economy, just as have the individuals who make up the congregation. We are short of the money that we need to begin building our new building and we are also about \$20,000 worth of pledges short of where we need to be in terms of our annual operating budget for next year. That's no small gap, although I can tell you quite truthfully, that we are faring no worse – and in most cases, far better than many other congregations around the district and the country.

Perhaps our biggest challenge though lies in how to cope with our anxiety about money and our uncertainty about the building, without letting them derail us. There will always be imperfections that we can point to here, and anxiety often leads us to point our fingers at this or at that. Our greatest challenge in these anxious times will be to resist focusing overly much on what we lack and to stay on track with our mission – that is, to stay focused on our communal vision and on hearing clearly our communal call.

The word “mission,” by the way, comes from a Latin word meaning, “to send.”

And since we're talking about word origins, I recently learned something I did not know before. I knew that the word “pastor” means shepherd, which is why so many UU ministers do not use that title; the implication being, of course, that you are all sheep. What I did not know is that the word “congregation” actually shares a root with the with the Greek word for “sheep.” So we've been inadvertently implicating ourselves for some time.

One minister and author has suggested that instead of “congregation” – which implies, among other things, a certain helplessness and lack of agency – we use the word “assembly” to represent us. An assembly is a coming together of persons for a particular purpose. And “assembly” comes from a root which means “the called out,” or the “sent.” He notes that assemblies – unlike sheep – have the power to change things, which is why totalitarian regimes restrict assemblies and why the US Constitution guarantees our right to assemble.

Assemblies are groups of persons with a purpose and a mission and the power to change – their lives, their communities, the world. How much more apt a way to think of a gathering of UU’s than as a flock of sheep! Right?

The question though is, “What are we called out to do?” What is the purpose for which we are gathered? What is the mission we are “sent” to accomplish? What is the vision we are called to manifest? The strength of a church ultimately relies in large part on how clearly and how uniformly the gathered can answer that question.

This morning we heard the first few verses from chapter 61 of Isaiah, one of the great Hebrew prophets. According to the Luke, in the Christian scriptures, Jesus began his public ministry by standing up in the local synagogue and reading this passage from the Torah scrolls.

I chose this as the reading for this morning, because it is one that is a clear expression of one person’s sense of call – or vocation – and of his vision for a transformed world. Jesus clearly understood himself to be sent – or called – to act in the world in a way that would bring about healing – physical, emotional, and social.

The radical thing about Jesus was not that he chose or read this passage, but that after having read it, he proclaimed that the scripture had been fulfilled that day. That shocked his hearers. I have always imagined that his audience heard that as pure arrogance: “What do you mean, YOU are the anointed one?” And I think most Christians today see it simply as a statement of truth: “Of course, Jesus is the anointed one!”

But as a UU, I read it a little differently. I like to believe that Jesus was saying, “Look, anyone who reads this – anyone who hears this – all of us are the anointed ones. All of us are sent to bring good news to the oppressed and brokenhearted. All of us are sent to proclaim release to the indebted. All of us are sent to comfort those who mourn.”

As UU’s it is our faith that Jesus wasn’t – and isn’t – the only one with a job to do. We know ourselves – as we sang a couple of weeks ago – to be the ones for whom we have been waiting. This scripture is fulfilled whenever any of us hear it and understand ourselves to be “sent” or “called.” Which brings us back to “mission”...that which we are “sent” to do.

Some months ago, I took a closer look at our Mission and Covenant Statement and tried to distill from it its core themes. If the Mission and Covenant were to be boiled down, reduced to its essence, I wondered, how might it read? And this is what I came up with:

Through our mutual agreement and according to our mutual promises, we are all...

Called to care for one another...  
Challenged to grow spiritually...and...  
Committed to serve the needs of others

To the extent that we do those three things well and in balance, we are, I believe, living out our Mission and fulfilling our vision. We are doing what we are “sent” or “called” to do. And in doing all of that we are, in effect, working to manifest the Beloved Community in our lives.

But what will the Beloved Community look like as it becomes more and more manifest here in our Assembly? What would the fruits of such a manifestation be?

Jesus used to teach people about the Kingdom of God through the prolific use of metaphors and similes. The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, he would say. Or, the Kingdom of God is like yeast that a woman took and added to 3 measures of flour until it was all leavened.

What is the Beloved Community like? There is no one right answer. In fact, it takes all of us imagining the Beloved Community to come anywhere close to describing what it might look like. So, I’d like to invite you to join in this visioning exercise with me.

For the next few minutes, I’m going to share some images of what I think the Beloved Community might look like as it continues to manifest itself here among us. Of course, we could do this exercise to imagine a national or global picture, too, but this morning, I’m focusing on the picture here in this religious community. I invite you to listen to my suggestions and then, to write one or two of your own on your index card and turn it in with the offering or to hand it to me after the service. Here we go...

The Beloved Community is like the youngest members of our congregation sitting together with the oldest and playing Go Fish on a Sunday afternoon and filling the room with laughter and smiles and new memories.

The Beloved Community is like a group of women getting together once every few weeks to talk about the challenges and frustrations of caring for their aging parents, sharing their experiences, crying together, offering one another hugs and Kleenex, as needed.

The Beloved Community is like church neighbors checking in on one another after an ice storm, going door-to-door, if necessary, and providing food, water, and shelter for those who need it, especially for the most vulnerable.

The Beloved Community is like the youth group gathering all their friends, and holding a rice and bean supper to raise money for Loaves and Fishes. And it is like all the adults – even those who are not related to the kids – coming to share in the food and the fellowship and the fundraising, sending the message to the kids that they really and truly are a vital part of the assembly.

The Beloved Community is like a group of families with young children getting together to talk regularly about money and family budgets and to support one another in spending joyfully, spending justly, spending less, and then pooling their money to give more to an organization that helps eliminate global poverty...growing more generous in community.

The Beloved Community is like a young mother witnessing some injustice in the course of a normal day and then recruiting 10 of her friends from the Assembly to help her address the problem...without having to go through the minister or the board or the social action committee to get something done.

The Beloved Community is like a young family, which doesn't have grandparents nearby, adopting an older person or couple from the Assembly; and then calling to check-in on them regularly, dropping by weekly with some homemade soup or cookies, spending an hour reading or sharing stories, inviting them over for a meal, or out to lunch, or to a recital or a play.

The Beloved Community is like a man, whose children are grown and out of the house, thinking it would be nice to get together with other men from the Assembly to play poker, to talk about how being a Unitarian Universalist makes a difference in their lives at work and at home, or to spend one Saturday a month building a home for Habitat for Humanity; and then making it happen.

The Beloved Community is like a group of men and women from the Assembly getting together a couple times a month to share in conversation that goes deeper than any coffee hour conversation can – conversation about that which is both intimate and ultimate, about their hardships and joys and doubts and beliefs – coming to know each other well and love each other deeply, with great appreciation for their differences. And also finding themselves changed by the experience.

Jesus taught his disciples that what he called the Kingdom of God was already near at hand. And so it is with the Beloved Community. Or as Thich Nhat Hanh, the Zen Buddhist monk and teacher, likes to say, “When conditions are right, things manifest.” The Beloved Community is already here, just waiting to be made manifest in our lives. We just need to know what we're looking for. And then our job is to contribute to making the conditions right...and then to wait and watch it grow.

The bottom line is that “church” isn't a place we go. “Church” is not a building, neither one that we can tear down, nor one that we can build. “Church” is not something we do.

Church is something we are and something we strive to be. Rather than doing things for church, we need simply to act as church. We are called to live our mission. We are called to make real our vision. It's not about how many much money we have in our endowment, or how big our annual budget is, or how many square feet our buildings are or will be.

We are an Assembly – a people with power, who are gathered for a purpose...

Called to care for one another  
Challenged to grow spiritually  
Committed to serve the needs of others...

In the end, the charge is very simple: Let's be church! Let's let our light shine. Let's keep growing stronger and stronger as we continue to live our communal vision in response to our communal call.

So may it be. Amen.