

Living the Dream
Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo
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One evening, about this time last year, I was in the car with my kids, driving home from a doctor's appointment. We got to talking about what it means to be a grown up. I shared some of my wishes for them and they shared some of the things that they wanted. The conversation took a few twists and turns about what makes us happy, and about getting and keeping a job that you like, and having friends. Somehow in this collaboration we stumbled upon this sentence:

“We strive to be strong, responsible, compassionate, self-motivated, problem solvers who know how to have fun!”

I suddenly realized that this set of character traits was a mission statement for life. I pointed this out to the kids and they got excited about it, so right then and there, on the car ride home, we committed it to memory. Yes, we have a family mission statement. And ever since we adopted it, we have been able to celebrate these character traits when we exhibit them, or call them to mind when it seems we're off track.

My kids really own this. Their behavior began to change immediately! I came home from work the next day to find the kids had done their chores. Self-initiated. Responsible. They gave the dog his walk because it was the compassionate thing to do. Does this happen every single day? (In my dreams!) But, it happens, more and more often as they mature.

Why?!

Because my kids own this, because they know it's not just a bunch of high minded ideas that *mom* is putting on them, but rather their own ideas about how to be the people they want to be.

To promote today's sermon I wrote that today I would explore how shared ministry is created when we answer the question "Why are we here?" Creating a community of people who are spiritually competent and engaged in the work of our faith is a thoughtful and deliberate process.

So, let me use that as I continue to speak today. What is shared ministry and what does it have to do with why we are Here?

First I want to tackle the question: Why are We Here?

We're here because this place is special. And while we love and want to take care of our beautiful historic building, we're not here just because the building is magnificent. We'd still be a community without it. (Though I must say that fixing the hole in the sanctuary roof is a very good call.)

We're here because when we come here we experience something we don't get to experience everywhere else. We're here because this faith encourages us to find our own answers, but gives

us a community to support that effort. We're here because we are allowed to bring our doubts as well as our convictions. We're here to raise children with a social conscience. We're here to be inspired by prophetic words and music. We're here because we embrace ideals of sexuality that are liberal and progressive, and acknowledge that to be spiritually whole, we need to be free to express our true identity. We're here because we insist on engaging our sense of reason with our ethical and religious explorations. We're here because we have found a community that, ideally, embraces us for who we really are. And I'm sure I've only touched the tip of the iceberg of why we are all here.

We still don't have a concise mission statement that just rolls off the tongue, but with Margret's guidance many of you are engaged in the work that will eventually lead to that. So, for now I'll use mission statements from a couple of other UU churches for examples.

The Unitarian Church of Rochester has the following mission statement:

*Creating connection by
listening to our deepest selves,
opening to life's gifts and
serving needs greater than our own -
every day!*

The church in Portland Oregon says:

“The mission of First Unitarian Church of Portland...is to create a welcoming community of diverse individuals; to promote love, reason and freedom in religion; to foster lifelong spiritual growth; and to act for social justice.”

As you work with Margret to create a mission that speaks to you, our community will really begin to take shape.

Why does our mission matter? Well, think of a couple of companies. Would Ford Motor Company try to sell you cookware? Would Dow Chemical Company try to sell you cat food? No!, It's not their mission. Anymore than the American Cancer Society would have a candy cigarette fundraiser. Why we are here matters.

Having a mission helps us to focus on the things that really matter to us, and use our resources and energy to affect the strongest impact on our community. We can't be all things to all people, but we can be great things to many. And when the mission belongs to you it is much more powerful than words that are handed to you by someone else.

A mission is meant to inspire with the highest of ideals. It should be the heart of who you are. The details come later in vision statements and goals. The mission is the topic statement of the thesis and the thought you are left with when you leave to go about your lives.

How many of you have heard of TED Talks? TED talks are a series of usually 15-20 minute talks about Technology, Education and Design that are presented at conferences around the world.

They bring together innovative ideas and smart people who are doing real things to change the world.

In a recent TED Talk, Simon Sinek spoke about how Great Leaders Inspire Action. The diagram from his talk is the cover on your order of service today. It's a simple design, but it gets to the heart of mission. In his talk he explains how the most successful organizations work from the inside out on this circle, from why to how to what... not the other way around.

He explained how when you start from the outside, your message just isn't compelling. If your "why" is not attached to what you do, you don't capture the imagination of your market. And the reception is lukewarm at best.

But, when you start from the "why", people are willing to spend their time and their treasure on things that they believe in. To quote Sinek, "Martin Luther King Jr. didn't stand up to say 'I have a Plan,' he said 'I have a DREAM.'"

And because King said:

"I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit together at the table of brotherhood." ... people have worked for generations to make that reality true, not only for Dr King but for themselves. It is a dream and a mission that people can really get behind.

Sometimes when we start off we don't know how we'll get there or what we need to do to make it a reality, but those decisions will be made with our eyes on the mission.

Think of a road trip, for example. If I want to drive from here to Phoenix, Arizona for Justice GA, I'm not likely to stop off at Disney World in Florida on the way. Disney World might be nice, my family would like to go there, but it's way out of the way, and I won't have any time or money left to get to Arizona by the time I've had my fun there.

Or to quote Yogi Berra, the beloved NY Yankees manager with a delightful habit of twisting a phrase who once said, "If you don't know where you're going, you'll probably end up someplace else."

In both the Rochester and Portland UU mission statements we see community as a central theme: "a community of diverse individuals", and "creating connection." But, is community enough? Or do we have more work to do to create shared ministry?

I believe we need to take it further. As they say in Portland, "To promote lifelong spiritual learning." Or in Rochester, "to listen to our deepest selves." Theses speak to the development of spiritual competency.

So what is spiritual competence? As individuals it means knowing enough to choose our values and having a sense of something larger or deeper. Building spiritual competency comes from taking the time for spiritual practices, fleshing out our spiritual and ethical beliefs, creating the

internal “why” that we bring with us to the communal “why.” It is the basis for our commitments. It is creating those individual mission statements that then merge into our community mission.

Shared ministry in our community happens when something in the communal mission calls us to use our gifts, and we work together in community with shared vision and goals. In Rochester they say “serving needs that are greater than our own,” in Portland they say “act for social justice,” and in my blurb, I had said “engaged in the work of our faith.”

But it boils down to this. When we know why we are here, we know how to spend our resources and what to spend our time on. Our passions unite and we can truly change the world.

As the Director of Religious Education, I am seeking people who know why they are here to help guide our children. We offer sermons and adult education classes to help people to learn why they are UUs. And many of you have spiritual practices that help to deepen this knowing at home.

We need people like you who have developed this understanding to share in the teaching of our young people. We need people who have developed a deep commitment to Unitarian Universalism over time. This cannot always be the job of parents, many of whom are new to UU themselves, though they are welcome to come and teach and learn alongside their children. Teaching is a good way of learning.

I am looking for people who care about how our children develop. How do they learn about our values? If you are interested, come and talk to me. I can help you find out how your gifts fit into the RE program.

What we do next year and in the years to come will depend on you. Our programming needs to reflect our mission as a community. It is a shared ministry that is enlivened by the creative input and example of spiritually mature and competent adults who are awake to the depth and joy of this faith.

One of the reasons we are here is to promote the development of all of our people into a community of spiritually competent people who are engaged in the work of our faith.

How will we help our children become these things?

To be a community they need time to be together. That means they need to attend regularly. If you are a parent, try to make a commitment to several times per month. A healthy spirituality is at least as important as theater and sports.

To be spiritually competent, our children need to learn about our faith, our history, our worship practices and about the breadth and depth of religious thought and experience that are available in the religions of the world. They need to be empowered to develop spiritual practices of their own to sustain them through difficult times that they will face in their lives. We offer them this opportunity through our programs.

And to engage in the work of our faith, children need to understand our values, and to be awake to the injustice and suffering in the world, and then feel empowered to do something about it. Working with adults who can pave the way is a vital step to learning how to do this for themselves as they become adults.

To raise our children as spiritual beings, we need to embrace a sense of mission. We don't need to have all the answers going in, but we do need to know why we are here, so that we can share that with our children. When we know why we come together, it becomes much easier to decide how we practice our faith and what activities we will do together and in the larger community.

So I ask you now. Why are you here? How do you want to fit into this community? What are your gifts? Are you willing to share them with this community?

I have a dream. I have a dream that we will build a world where our children are spiritually healthy people who know their gifts and are empowered to share those gifts with the world in which they live.