

October 28, 2009

TO: Countryside Church UU
FROM: Michael Durall
RE: Preliminary report

I enjoyed my visit to Palatine, and appreciated the gracious hospitality of many church members. A special thanks goes to those who provided lunch, snacks, and handled the set-up arrangements.

My first impression of Countryside Church was a healthy and engaged congregation, given the high ministerial turnover in recent years. I also found Countryside to be a warm and welcoming congregation, with people who enjoy being together. And, I found members of the congregation hopeful about the future. These are significant assets.

This preliminary report is written for all members of the congregation to read and comment upon. It contains a variety of observations and recommendations. I'm hoping the church will schedule a few occasions for members to discuss these findings. The more feedback I receive from the congregation, the better the plan for the future will be.

I. A guiding principle

Before getting to my recommendations, it is important to note that congregations often believe they can grow in membership and envision a new tomorrow without changing anything that is currently in place. This is a myth.

Congregations of all faiths are living, breathing organisms, not petrified forests forever locked in time. Churches must evolve and adapt to a rapidly changing American society, one that is increasingly inhospitable to religious expression.

Some of the recommendations in this report are minor tweaks and some fall into the category of systemic change. Not every parishioner may look favorably on every recommendation. Not every decision the leadership makes will be satisfying to all. Thus, I suggest a couple of basic ground rules.

II. Two ground rules

First, to address the variety of recommendations that follow, and those that Countryside parishioners themselves put forward, I propose that if church members have concerns about certain decisions, their voices may certainly be heard. But those concerns should be accompanied by alternative ideas or proposals. Church members may not merely criticize the efforts of others.

The second ground rule is that some recommendations may be considered on a trial basis, for three months, six months, or a year. If a recommended initiative doesn't play out as anticipated, the congregation may return to previous ways. This policy is reassuring to those who have doubts about one idea or another.

III. Recommendations for the future

Immediate

A. In the current campaign for building repairs and reduction of the mortgage, a team of dedicated souls has put in hundreds of hours of time and effort in figuring this all out. They have done a superb job in defining the building's needs and proposing effective solutions. I ask each and every member of this congregation to make the rest of their job easy, by turning in your pledge cards at the earliest opportunity.

Please don't make this team put out a second or a third mailing, then add to their work by requiring them to make multiple phone calls to track people down. My understanding is that annual pledge drives require multiple mailings, many phone calls, and months to complete. This is an institutionalized bad habit, which should be consigned to the past. This is just not

how you should behave as a congregation. I ask church members to rise to the occasion and do the right thing.

B. I don't believe I've ever worked with a congregation that exhibits such a pent-up desire to engage more directly with the larger community. An immediate and powerful way to accomplish this goal is to give away the offering each Sunday, to organizations that live out your values. This will mean the congregation realizes its dream each Sunday, and that church members will be successful in this endeavor every time they gather together.

Scores of churches have adopted this practice. Most have seen threefold or more increases in plate offerings, along with an increase in the annual pledge drive. You will not rob Peter to pay Paul. Most parishioners can put \$5, \$10, or \$20 in the collection plate on Sundays, and this will not affect their quality of life.

Please note: members who have pledged to the church do not get a free pass on the offering. This is a ministry for everyone.

C. Regarding "grinners and greeters" on Sunday morning, Countryside Church doesn't necessarily have to place only grown-ups in this role. On occasion, parents with young children, or members of the Coming of Age group would bring an added friendliness. Greeters also need not stand only inside the front entrance. Weather permitting, greeters might stand outside, on the sidewalk.

First-time visitors to any church experience some uncertainty. I found your congregation to be friendly and outgoing. The sooner you display this friendliness, the more reassured newcomers will be they've made the right decision to visit.

D. I encourage the church to host days of silence, perhaps once each quarter, in which members take a pause from their hectic lives and find a place of peace and equilibrium. Structured silences help us reflect on the kind of people that Unitarian Universalism calls us to become in this place and time.

E. I encourage members and friends to keep Sunday as a day apart, not just another day on the secular calendar. This might include refraining from commercial activities (grocery stores, mall shopping), not doing work brought home from the office, or going to the office. I also encourage people not to drive their cars once home from church. This practice helps us reclaim some sense of the sacred in our lives.

F. In its effort to become a greener congregation, Countryside could do away with the printed Order of Service on Sunday mornings. Millions of people, of many faiths, attend church services regularly and most of them have never laid eyes on an Order of Service. This practice would save Countryside countless reams of paper in a given year.

IV. A recommendation to consider before the end of the current church year

Countryside Church should schedule two worship services. This decision is essential for the congregation's future health and growth. Numerous church members told me about bringing in extra chairs, and people having to stand in the back.

Some members may view Countryside as one big happy family, and believe that two services would be divisive. Some years ago, I belonged to a church that went from one to two services, and some members were unhappy. They felt they would not see their friends at church anymore. Now, some years later, two services is an established custom, and it seems like it has always been that way.

The issue of two services raises the important question of whom the church should serve. Church literature is replete with references that when a sanctuary reaches 80 percent capacity, visitors may not wish to enter. In my view, many people today are lost and lonely, searching for meaning and purpose in their lives. If Countryside (or any other church) remains a type of private enclave and cares little about wandering souls finding a community of faith, this seems cold-hearted to me.

I realize this may be a difficult decision for the Countryside congregation. It brings to mind a quote from prominent church author Lyle Schaller, who wrote, "Every church wants to grow, but nobody wants all those strangers around here."

Churches of many faiths that are growth-oriented believe that new people bring fresh energy, new perspectives, innovative ideas, and add to the strength of the congregation as a whole. I'm hoping Countryside will adopt such a positive, engaging attitude toward people you do not yet know.

In discussions with various church members, I heard suggestions ranging from two identical services on Sunday morning; to two different services on Sunday morning; to one service on Saturday afternoon and one service on Sunday morning. Fortunately, you have many paths to choose!

One final note about two services. I believe this should be an issue decided by the leadership of the church, after adequate deliberation and study. If Countryside holds a congregational meeting and schedules a vote, the issue of two services will likely be voted down. Given the choice of preserving the past or envisioning a new future, most congregations choose to preserve the familiar.

Also, if a vote is taken and results in a 52-48 percent decision, this means half the congregation will be on the losing side. Countryside should avoid this at all costs.

V. Recommendations for the coming 1-2 years

During various sessions while I was at the church, I asked parishioners to write down answers to questions I posed. Among them were:

A. *Are the expectations of membership too low, about right, or too high?*

Almost every response indicated that expectations of membership at Countryside are too low. I recognize that progress has been made on this front, in particular, doing away with the \$75 minimum pledge.

I would like to refer readers to my recent book, *The Almost Church Revitalized*, in particular Chapter Four, titled, "Creating Committed Members." In this chapter, I recommend the concept of Integrity of Membership, which includes:

- Attending Sunday services regularly
- Participating in one program each year that deepens your faith
- Engaging in one outreach project each year
- Reaching the 5-10 percent charitable giving level
- Telling others about the church

In my view, the above items help create meaning in a life of faith. I view these as very good things, not burdens that church members have to bear.

I also recommend that the Membership Committee consist of dedicated souls who believe the church or Unitarian Universalism has changed their lives in significant ways, and who can convey this sentiment to others. The membership initiative is not just another committee assignment, but rather an extremely vital ministry.

My second question was:

B. In terms of the giving capacity of the congregation, is this capacity barely tapped, or maxed out?

Once again, the overwhelming response was that the giving capacity is barely tapped. Financial planners often claim that middle-class Americans could double their charitable giving to all causes and not notice the slightest difference in their daily lives.

Thus, Countryside Church could double its annual pledge drive with ease. If so, your congregation could support a walk-in health clinic in a marginal neighborhood, one that would affect thousands of lives for the better. Most congregations do not realize that such powerful initiatives are well within their grasp.

My third question was in regard to outreach:

C. Do you believe Countryside should have a greater involvement with the larger community?

The responses to this question were overwhelmingly in favor of a greater role in the community. Thus, I hope Countryside will move toward committing 10 percent of the operating budget to mission and outreach beyond your own four walls. Protestant congregations across the land commit 10 percent to outside causes. This practice will help congregants build core values that they share in common, and is one of the most effective methods of evangelism.

If Countryside commits the Sunday offering to outreach and works toward committing 10 percent of the budget beyond your own four walls, this will be a significant amount of money to be allocated. Countryside should consider forming a Ministry Outreach Team, which would consist of the minister, a representative from the Social Action Committee, someone from the program council, and perhaps two church members who are appointed. These people, in my view, would form a trustworthy group that would make recommendations as to where the money goes.

Further, I recommend that Countryside not parcel out very small dollar amounts, or make local charities fill out lengthy forms to get miniscule grants. Your congregation has the potential to make a major impact for the better.

VI. Longer term recommendations

- A. I'm hoping the embrace of Integrity of Membership, committing more to outreach, keeping Sunday set apart, and occasional days of silence will build core values that members share in common.

In my work with UU congregations, I find that a lack of core values weakens the sense of community that we attempt to build. I do not believe it is sufficient for UUs to say, "We are here and we are diverse, and that is enough."

Core values are not theologically based, but rather are integral to the concept of what kind of people the church calls us to become. The values listed above are not Christian, humanist, or earth-centered, but cross all theological lines. These values describe a people who are called to serve, who do not expect the church to always serve them.

- B. I also hope that during any long-range or strategic planning sessions, that two sentences remain on the top of every page. The first is the goal of creating a community of compassion. The second is to build a church that seizes opportunities when they arise.

All too often, long-range planning sessions focus on administration, finance, and care of the property, which become ends in themselves. Such work should always be a means to greater service in the community.

- C. Related to previous issue, I've encouraged the leadership to be cognizant of leading the church somewhere, not just focusing on the business at hand. To quote Schaller once again, he often says that churches "recreate yesterday," that they tend to live the same year over and over.

But leading the church somewhere is also the larger congregation's business. To be sure, churches have their familiar holidays and holy days, and occasions of great meaning. But it's all too easy to settle into a routine. I'm hoping Countryside will explore new vistas and engage people previously unknown.

I'm also hoping the church culture might involve a bit of mischievousness, perhaps in the form of a surprise in the Sunday morning music; or the appearance of an African-American Pentecostal minister in the pulpit; or leaders who will introduce new ideas that challenge the congregation's long-held views. I believe that religion should be a great adventure and not a leisure activity.

- D. I recommend that Countryside expand its "Good Will" program that encourages members to include the church in their estate plans. A number of members I spoke with are interested in serving as Good Will Ambassadors. This will ensure that Countryside remains on a solid financial footing.
- E. Finally, I'm unsure if the greater Palatine area includes any ethnic churches. If so, Countryside might form a simple partnership, in which members of another church visit Palatine en masse once each year, and in return, Countryside members visit that ethnic church once each year. If we are to address racism, surely this begins with people seated next to one another in church, and breaking bread with one another afterwards.

VII. Metaphors and analogies

One of my favorite exercises is asking people if they have analogies or metaphors that describe their church in any particular way. Listed below are examples from Countryside members. I found these examples to be quite poignant, expressing unfulfilled yearnings, along with a hesitancy or tentativeness in regard to congregational life.

"A safe, generally productive harbor."

"A cat inside a bag, struggling to find its way out."

"A young adult entering full personhood."

"Yearning for a larger purpose."

"A fair weather church."

"A group of people in a room with the lights off, hoping for the lights to come on and help us find our bearings."

"A person treading water in the lake."

“An awkward teenager with a growing body.”

“A beautiful garden that needs water.”

“Creative, thoughtful, caring people waiting to be harvested.”

“Need to grow deeper roots, longer branches, more nourishing fruit.”

“A comfy pillow and blankie to keep me safe.”

“A wonderful upward moving spiral.”

“Pregnant with wisdom and joy, waiting to spread it around.”

“In need of guidance and support.”

“A snake, ready to shed its old skin and grow.”

“An engine, hitting on four of eight cylinders.”

“An oasis of sanity and caring in an oftentimes crazy and uncaring world.”

VIII. Concluding comments

In my remarks from the pulpit, I mentioned the Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Gilead*, by Marilynne Robinson. This book is written in the form of a memoir from a minister to his young son. In the memoir, the minister writes of his own father, who was also a minister, and says,

“My father had nowhere to spend his courage. No way to find it in himself. This was a great pity.”

In churches today, I wonder if we help people find their courage. Numerous surveys indicate that church-going and non-churched people live almost identical lives. I think this is another great pity. Surely, a congregation like Countryside will have a life-changing effect on the lives of people who join its community. Surely, there is a defined UU way of life that challenges the prevailing culture of working ever-longer hours, taking on ever greater amounts of debt, and acquiring ever more expensive consumer goods.

I’m hoping that Countryside Church will become a beacon for other congregations in the Association, by taking our faith seriously and believing that something truly important is at stake in Palatine.