

ENACTING PUBLIC THEOLOGY THROUGH EFFECTIVE RELIGIOUS  
INSTITUTIONS:  
LEARNING THROUGH CONGREGATIONAL QUARANTINE IN THE PANDEMIC  
YEAR 2020

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## ABSTRACT

ENACTING PUBLIC THEOLOGY THROUGH EFFECTIVE RELIGIOUS

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Unitarian Universalist congregations are designed and called to be locations and models of Beloved Community amid a hurting world, so their organizational effectiveness can be described as an act of public theology. But what makes a congregation effective? Furthermore, are there lessons that congregations learned through the Covid19 pandemic in 2020 that help point the way toward longer lasting effectiveness, a new vibrancy for the faith community's next chapter?

Organizational development research and congregational study shows that three markers of congregational effectiveness in the current age are: attention to mission; nimbleness; and creating an ethos of belonging/Beloved Community. This paper looks at the experiences of six congregations, congregational partnerships and other religious departments to see how the emergency-level changes they were forced to make due to the quarantine enabled these three qualities to emerge and enhance their operations.

Not to be overlooked, a major quality of building an ethos of belonging in American society is taking steps to dismantle the systems of oppression automatically at work in our congregations and in most American institutions. The thriving congregation

of the future will embed equity into its operations. There is no possibility of true Beloved Community without significant effort to combat the ways oppression erodes it.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **THE EFFECTIVE USE OF INSTITUTIONS IN THE WORK OF PUBLIC THEOLOGY**

Perhaps the easiest figure to conjure when imagining an act of public theology is the lone prophet on the soapbox in the town square – or the online version of such, or the media version of such – speaking truth to an immoral power. The second easiest may be the abrupt grassroots organizing of suddenly inspired or last-straw-weary individuals who join together for a collective action. It may be rarer to think of old, staid bureaucratic institutions as locations of public theology – even religious ones.

Why is this? In part perhaps because of the conservative nature of institutions. In part perhaps because of a religious history that takes many forms of religion out of the public square and back into houses of worship or the hearts of the faithful. And in part perhaps because of the generally disorganized and ineffective ways our congregations can be run. It is this third hypothesis I would like to explore in this paper. How can our congregations best be organized to be effective vehicles for public theology, i.e., theologically informed justice seeking in the public square? How can we capture the heft and gifts of institutions in order to advance our religious values in the world at large? Surely it would be a shame to ignore our religious institutions and all their resources as we pursue a more equitable and just world.

Public theology matters. A connection to faith imperatives is a key component to justice work. We would not do well to pursue justice without the aid of religion.

“Religion...can provide the sense of injustice, the sense of agency, and the sense of

identity that collective action requires.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps an individual religious quest, plan or voice is occasionally powerful - certainly those individuals are easy to observe - but I would argue that it is people in groups who are most effective in bringing about change in the world, and that religious institutions can be our most robust examples of people organizing into effective groupings.

Robert Wuthnow posits similarly in his essay, “Can Religion Revitalize Civil Society?” when he writes, “...people may be virtuous, but how they express their virtue depends on the fact that they live within institutions.”<sup>2</sup> He goes on to write, “[a]n institutional perspective... emphasizes that [revitalization of society] often occurs within institutions and because of them, as well as from the actions of charismatic leaders and social movements. Indeed, most charismatic leaders and social movements are more effective when they utilize the resources of institutions. More important, the preservation and improvement of civil society depends to a large extent on the judicious uses of funds, influence, knowledge, and administrative structures in institutions.”<sup>3</sup>

Working backwards, it seems that an ineffective religious institution is at the least a missed opportunity to shift the world into a more just and equitable framework. The religious organizations we have are sitting on the franchise of effective moral action, and it is in our best interest to make sure that they are equipped to offer the most effective aid possible. In Unitarian Universalism alone, there are slightly more than 1000 individual

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<sup>1</sup> Rhys H. Williams, "The Language of God in the City of Man: Religious Discourse and Public Politics in America." In *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good*, by Corwin Smidt, Chapter 11. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2003,) 182.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Wuthnow, "Can Religion Revitalize Civil Society?" In *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good*, by Corwin A. Smidt. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2003,) 195.

<sup>3</sup> Wuthnow, “Religion,” 208.

congregations, more than 100,000 members, and a denominational nonprofit Association with more than 200 employees and nearly 30 million dollars in their annual operating budget, plus millions more in endowment funds. In many ways, UU congregations and the Unitarian Universalist Association, like all religious institutions, are groups of individuals who have already done significantly heavy lifting in organizing with the intention of making the world a better place, in the lives of their members, their communities, and society at large. How can we best leverage this inheritance?

### **A LOCATION AND MODEL OF BELOVED COMMUNITY**

There are potentially as many options for expressing public theology in Unitarian Universalism as there are Unitarian Universalists since we support the free and responsible search for truth and meaning in our individuals and our communities (Appendix A). Given this diversity, however, there is a concept that unites us, and that is building beloved community.

Since Unitarian Universalism regards itself as a religious humanist community bound by common purpose and behavior, the way in which our people do and do not treat each other justly or ethically in our own communities has come into deep focus in recent years. The work of renewing behavioral covenants in our congregations has been a focus as we moved from communities where any behavior was tolerated in the name of personal freedom to ones where the shared goal was to make room for a diversity of voices and to avoid interpersonal violence.

Added to this, in the past three to four years a sharp focus has shifted to the way in which our congregations and our denomination have been and continue to be especially unwelcoming to people of color both seeking us out and already in our midst.



A denominational hiring dispute in 2017 led among other actions to the charging of a Commission on Institutional Change whose 2020 report “Widening the Circle of Concern” outlined multiple ways in which the faith needs to engage with and welcome people outside of Unitarian Universalism’s dominant culture.<sup>4</sup>

I believe the goal of Unitarian Universalism can be best described as practicing Beloved Community. Per the King Center, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King popularized this term in using principles of non-violent protest to effect social change and racial justice. King’s vision “is a global vision, in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth.” At the interpersonal level,

[King] recognized that conflict was an inevitable part of human experience. But he believed that conflicts could be resolved peacefully and adversaries could be reconciled through a mutual, determined commitment to nonviolence... And all conflicts in The Beloved Community should end with reconciliation of adversaries cooperating together in a spirit of friendship and goodwill.<sup>5</sup>

Like King, Unitarian Universalists believe that different people with different beliefs and backgrounds can form a community of common purpose and mutual support called Beloved Community. What’s more, Unitarian Universalists have the capacity to bring this model of mutually supportive community to the common square. Although we are no more than students in this work ourselves, our common commitment to it can serve as a model to others in a nation and world where differences increasingly lead to separation and violence. The practice of Beloved Community in our home congregations

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<sup>4</sup> Commission on Institutional Change. Widening the Circle of Concern. Commissioned Findings, Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2020.  
<https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/cic/widening>

<sup>5</sup> The King Center. thekingcenter.org. n.d. <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThe%20Beloved%20Community%E2%80%9D%20is%20a,However%2C%20it%20was%20Dr.> (accessed January 29, 2021).

can be the soul-healing work that a traumatized person or community needs. The public theological work that Unitarian Universalists are best placed to enact is to be locations and models of the practice of Beloved Community: Locations of it in the sense that people are in their own communities working together peaceably towards common purpose; models of it in the sense that the successful practice of this work is unusual and draws the attention of a world starving for connection and peace.

### **THE PRE-PANDEMIC LANDSCAPE IN UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATIONS: A LOOK BACK AT MARCH 1ST, 2020**

It had been evident for many years that the average UU congregational system, like the average American mainline Protestant congregational system, was failing and needed renewal. UUs are culturally much like mainstream Protestantism that found a heyday and enormous vitality and expansion in the baby boom era after World War II. As March 2020 began, UU congregations often still ran under the implicit mission of the 1950s – maintain the independent, full-service corner church at all costs. Their structures best fit the social capacities of that time – a culture that was interested in membership as a concept, with lots of women in the home raising large families available to manage church life. The shifts in American culture in the past 70 years have drained our volunteer pool, our family constituencies, and our financial base, and yet our congregations continue to act as if those social changes do not make a difference to the functioning of church. The congregation that focused on its internal systems, enacting its implicit mission of simply keeping its individual institution alive, was typical, and as 2020 began, that typical congregation was finding it harder to make ends meet financially, systemically, and philosophically.

What did this look like on March 1, 2020? A great deal of strain and struggle, and more on the horizon. People seeking religious community do so these days because they want to make meaning of a chaotic world and make a difference in it, not so they can run a motley social club<sup>6</sup> in a time when all social clubs are uncommon and the purpose of them not understood. Potential new members do not see the point of joining a membership organization that demands a great deal of in-person maintenance with little visible output. Current members were stretched thinner and thinner, with fewer volunteers available to help keep a robust full-service system afloat. The financial needs of this form of congregation were onerous and mysterious to the previously unchurched people now filling the pews; institution builders of previous generations are making way to generations who place less value in objects and property.<sup>7</sup> In the United States at least, keeping to the tried-and-true has been turning into a slow-motion recipe for failure for our congregations and religious institutions. A change in direction was needed, described, insisted upon – but change is hard for our religious communities.

Although change is very hard,<sup>8</sup> keeping one's organizational head in the sand is simply not going to work. Constance Dierickx writes,

[s]ome leaders encourage hanging on to what was formerly effective, in the interest of stability. While 'staying the course' has a seductive quality of being low risk, it is the worst kind of risk and conveys a sense of safety that is false.

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<sup>6</sup> Carey McDonald, "Join Our Cause, Not Our Club." *Growing Unitarian Universalism*. September 23, 2015. <http://growinguu.blogs.uua.org/tag/growth/page/2/>.

<sup>7</sup> Derek Penwell, "What If the Kids Don't Want Our Church?" *Huffington Post*, March 19, 2013. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/what-if-the-kids-dont-want-our-church\\_b\\_2902781](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/what-if-the-kids-dont-want-our-church_b_2902781) (accessed January 29, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Robert B. Denhardt, Janet V. Denhardt, and Maria P. Aristigueta. *Managing Human Behavior in Public and Non Profit Organizations*. (Sage Publications, 2013,) 382.

This is especially true when the context is unstable. Companies that choose stability set themselves up for extinction.<sup>9</sup>

This describes precisely what our UU congregations had been doing when March of 2020 started. What's more, congregations who were willing to work to find 'the' new effective organizational model to follow were confronted by a world that changes quickly and doesn't follow any of the old rules. There is no one new way to replace the old one.

In a 2010 IBM Global CEO Study based on interviews with 1500+ CEOs, "[t]he study found that the biggest challenge facing public and private enterprises in the future will be the accelerated pace and complexity of a global society operating as a massively interconnected system."<sup>10</sup> The rate of change needed for individuals and organizations to thrive is disorienting for church leaders. "Permanent white-water conditions are regularly taking us all out of our comfort zones and asking things of us that we never imagined would be required. Permanent white water means permanent life outside one's comfort zone." The challenge for all is how to handle it. "Will [we] hunker down against the surf, holding on for dear life, or will [we] turn into it, harnessing the power it contains to take control of [our] own destiny?"<sup>11</sup> This question became prescient as March of 2020 developed.

### A Note on the Theology of Change

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<sup>9</sup> Constance Dierickx, PhD. *High-Stakes Leadership: Leading Through Crisis with Courage, Judgement and Fortitude*. (New York: Bibliomotion, Inc., 2018,) 75.

<sup>10</sup> Denhardt, et al. « Managing Human Behavior, » 59.

<sup>11</sup> Paul C. Light, *Sustaining Innovation: Creating Non Profit and Government Organizations that Innovate Naturally*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998,) 34.

In UU circles, much attention has been paid in recent months to the science fiction writing of Octavia Butler<sup>12</sup>, a woman of color who wrote in the second half of the 20th century, informing some of the theology and organizational development consulting work of notable speakers and consultants like adrienne marie brown<sup>13</sup>. adrienne marie brown's organizational work, especially her book *Emergent Strategy*<sup>14</sup>, quotes Butler's change theology in support of her organizational strategy which embraces change:

All that you touch  
 You change  
 All that you change  
 Changes you  
 The only everlasting truth  
 Is change  
 God is change

And:

Create no images of God. Accept the images that God has provided. They are everywhere, in everything. God is Change— Seed to tree, tree to forest; Rain to river, river to sea; Grubs to bees, bees to swarm. From one, many; from many, one; Forever uniting, growing, dissolving— forever Changing. The universe is God's self-portrait.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2000.

<sup>13</sup> adrienne marie brown elects to use lower case letters in her name

<sup>14</sup> adrienne marie brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. (Chico: AK Press, 2017,) 37.

<sup>15</sup> brown, *Emergent Strategy*.

This Butler change theology suggests that rather than only being a necessary condition for running a modern organization, an embracing of the change the world is constantly enacting is a deeply faithful orientation, one that puts the changer in deep communion with God. Taking this notion another step along, change theology suggests that resistance to change is a form of sin, if sin is a word to describe human distancing from the nature and purpose of God. Although this theology likely has deep connections to process theology,<sup>16</sup> it is not one that I have encountered in any traditional religious environment. Nevertheless, I think Butler's change theology points in a tantalizing direction for our coming effective religious efforts and organizations.

### **THEN CAME THE PANDEMIC: MARCH 15, 2020**

Almost overnight, the church's witness and worship has been turned upside down, through no choice of our own. And whether we like it or not, it is also being turned inside out. The question is quite simply whether the church will be able to adapt -not just for its survival, but with a spiritual vision to thrive in this unexplored terrain...[W]e must learn how to be led by God anew.... [w]hile this journey presents its challenges, they are far outweighed by their opportunities.<sup>17</sup>

The great rethink that Covid-19 is requiring of us is going to change the church forever, for bells are ringing that cannot be unring. One of those bells is the realization on the part of faith communities that they have a much bigger toolbox than they relied for carrying out the 'it' that is church.<sup>18</sup>

As March 2020 began the Unitarian Universalist Association was aware that the Covid19 pandemic could soon alter our usual congregational operations nationwide. Churches in the northwest United States were already closed, their neighboring nursing

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<sup>16</sup> Robert C. Mesle, *Process Theology: A Basic Introduction*. St Louis: Chalice Press, 1993.

<sup>17</sup> Paul-Gordon Chandler, "Into the Virtual." In *We Shall be Changed: Questions for the Post Pandemic Church*, by Mark D. W. Edington, ed. (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2020,) 3.

<sup>18</sup> Sarah Birmingham Drummond, "Supply Chains." In *We Shall be Changed: Questions for the Post Pandemic Church*, by Mark D.W. Edington. (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2020,) 73.

homes hotbeds of infection. Although individual cases in northeast cities were growing, especially in New York City, we on Unitarian Universalist staff and other church leaders were watching for what was termed “community spread,” meaning that the virus was so live in the community beyond transmission on a one-to-one level that everyone was at risk. On March 12, 2020 Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray, the President of the UUA, released a statement suggesting that churches limit gatherings to 25 people or fewer nationwide.<sup>19</sup> Here in the greater Washington DC area where I serve as a congregational consultant to nearly 30 congregations,<sup>20</sup> I recommended that our churches close their doors for the time being, erring on the side of caution. On March 15, 2020, they all did.

Thus began the quickest, wildest time of creativity and change that I have ever seen in a church setting. Nearly all our congregations moved from entirely in-person worship to entirely online worship within two weeks, not knowing how to do that at all. Facebook pages related to all aspects of virtual church proliferated with questions, ideas, experiments and support. UUA staff were quick to pull out new resource after resource from the explosion of creativity and experimentation to publish for the information of everyone<sup>21</sup>. Anyone who had some expertise to share – pandemic expertise, online worship expertise – was quick to create a learning opportunity about it with which

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<sup>19</sup> Susan Frederick-Gray, “Updated Recommendations for Your Congregation's Response to COVID-19.” March 12, 2020. <https://www.uua.org/pressroom/press-releases/updated-recommendations-your-congregations-response-covid-19> (accessed February 1, 2021).

<sup>20</sup> I serve as Regional Lead to the Central East Region of the Unitarian Universalist Association, one of five regions that help the denomination deliver support and services to our member congregations. I manage the staff team of then eleven who support our congregations in the region, and I directly support the 27 congregations in the greater Washington DC area. Because Unitarian Universalism has congregational polity, the role of the denomination is that of advising and supporting, rather than controlling or direct oversight. The Unitarian Universalist Association considers itself the embodiment of the covenant made between our member congregations to aid and support one another.

<sup>21</sup> You can find this treasure trove at <https://www.uua.org/safe/pandemics>

everyone could engage. And the resources were not only about the practical, but about the way we should engage this crisis: expect to do things more slowly. “Covid brain,” the kind of thinking that crisis creates, makes you lopy and confused: treat yourself and others gently. Perfection is not the goal; connection is. Do less, expect less, connect more.

Unitarian Universalists integrated care of our most vulnerable into our plans – the elderly, those with health concerns, those who had lost their jobs, those who were most affected by the disease. In May, “our churches are essential, and it is essential that we stay closed” became our motto as closures extended and we asked our congregations to prepare for a full church year of online services<sup>22</sup>. This was a bold recommendation. But we could not risk the vulnerable or older members of our congregations with our typical activities that we were learning were the most contagious: close quarters, hugging, singing. And we knew that a plan to allowed healthy people to meet while others were excluded was unfeasible. We were going to stay online for the duration.

The need for creativity and change only increased in those early months as every necessary church function and ritual had to be moved online. The primary and most complicated move was worship. Newly charged volunteer technology teams worked with staff and experimented with recording or live streaming people in their multiple homes and sending it to a central location. They made plans to manage online music and times for children and coffee hour and more, smoothing flow from section to section, deciding

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<sup>22</sup> Susan Frederick-Gray, “A Message from the UUA President: Updated Guidance for Gathering.” May 14, 2020. <https://www.uua.org/pressroom/press-releases/message-uua-president-updated-guidance-gathering> (accessed February 1, 2021).



what should be recorded ahead of time and what should be live, arising to execute Sunday morning as best they could<sup>23</sup>.

After worship was worked out, decisions needed to be made about church functioning and committees: how would the Board meet and make decisions? How would the staff work together? Then came the season for budgets, but how could any decisions be made about such an uncertain future? Then came the season for figuring out what to do with church rentals, weighing what was safe against what was essential, and the loss of income that their closures created. Then came the season for congregational meetings: how could voting take place online? Then came the season for exhaustion, for clergy realizing they had worked every day for months, for Zoom fatigue and a recommitment to exercise and figuring out how to vacation at home or by driving minimal distances.

Regathering rituals in September, moving some activities outdoors, online auctions, anticipating the holidays, keeping connected with congregants who were struggling, keeping connected with the sick, keeping connected with outside partners who supported neighbors struggling with deeper needs than we were finding inside our walls, all these actions required reinvention and recommitment. The parts of church that did not matter now receded to the background; lots of new things that mattered a lot were negotiated into life. Everything was new and complex<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Another horrible invention of the era was the ‘Zoom bomber,’ people who crashed religious and other gatherings and grabbed control of the system to share racist or sexual content. UUs don’t usually believe in hell, but we might make an exception for these folks.

<sup>24</sup> Since this paper is about congregational functioning I am keeping to factors relating to church life, but also very much in the mix was a self-destructing presidential administration, multiple police murders of African Americans, national racial justice uprisings, a presidential election, and a near coup attempt by domestic far right insurgents.

Even considering all the pain and suffering, those of us who study congregations and witnessed all these changes wondered if this was the time we had been waiting for. As outlined above, before the pandemic our congregations were largely phobic about change of any sort, often disinterested in how irrelevant they had become to the outside world, and occasionally so embroiled in internal, long term dispute that I wondered why they bothered coming together at all. Within just a few months they transformed, regularly reinventing themselves to meet the identified needs of a rapidly shifting world. Congregations sought and assessed what was needed and enacted it without much fuss. Well, there was a lot of fuss – fear, uncertainty, confusion and exhaustion were the watchwords of the times. But no-one was stuck, out of touch, complacent or polarized. I wondered what would happen as the dust began to settle.

I found amongst my congregations that the anxiety that comes with continuous uncertainty, novelty and experimentation began to subside after a few months. A new normal of constant modification and adjustment to no more than short-term planning began to emerge among our leaders. They simply got used to the way things needed to be during the pandemic. I began to realize that by the end of 2020 there would be congregations or new collaborations of church that would enact new systems or make plans that would last well beyond the quarantine times, new systems and plans that would make them healthier in the long term. A few nimble congregations or associations were already processing their learnings and experiences into changes that would make them effective and relevant far into the future. If I could time it right, I could capture some of their thinking and planning just as they were beginning to shift from an emergency mindset into a new way of being. This new way could carry them into a future far away

from the staid old models and systems that had been failing in the past. The interviews with six of these congregations or collaborations form the foundation of this project, along with my assessment of what makes for healthy congregational functioning in these times.

## **SIX INNOVATING ORGANIZATIONS**

I located appropriate interview subjects by asking my Unitarian Universalist Association field staff colleagues from around the country to make recommendations to me. I described the organizations I was looking for as ones who had used this time of Covid19 quarantine to make creative or innovative changes to their organization that were likely to last beyond the quarantine period. I left the criteria somewhat vague, hoping to see creativity that I could not at the time imagine, but I said I was particularly interested in structural changes, rather than just programmatic changes – after all, everyone had made significant programmatic changes. I wanted to talk to the ones who had foundationally changed in their perspectives and behavior and would not likely go back.

The organizations with whom I conducted interviews (see Appendix C for protocol) were:

- Borderlands Unitarian Universalists in Amado, AZ
- Community Creek Middle School Camp, Online in the UUA's Central East Region
- First Unitarian Universalist Church of Indiana, PA
- Northeast Wisconsin Group, northeast WI
- Potomac Partnership, Greater Washington DC

- Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Plattsburg, NY

Two of these organizations (Indiana, Plattsburgh) are small congregations in the northeast US. Three of them (Borderlands, Northeast Wisconsin Group and Potomac Partnership) are partnerships of congregations, either a strong worship partnership or an evolving programmatic partnership. One program (CommUnity Creek Middle School Camp, Online) emerged from an office of the denomination which was forced to deliver services in an entirely new way.

All but two of the people I spoke to appeared to identify as white. Some had been UUs and UU leaders for a long time, others for only a short while. The organizations spanned across the country, in both rural and urban settings, in both politically liberal and conservative locations.

I think it is no coincidence that many of the organizations are small (<100 members) or collections of smaller organizations. It is well known that smaller congregations often already can adapt to new environments, because they are intimate, nimble, and authentic already (for an overview see O'Brien 2010 among many others). They have to be responsive to create church with limited resources, and their structures need to be recreated constantly to adapt to the resources of the moment. My research captured the very first who were able to react to needs they discerned during the early days of the quarantine, and it makes sense that those who changed the quickest were small. The one exception, the Potomac Partnership, is a collection of three large (500 member +) congregations. However, much of their work had already begun when the quarantine started and was simply magnified and concentrated by the pandemic itself.

The conversations I had with each organization were energizing and enjoyable. Many of them reported that it was nice to have the chance to think about what they had been able to do and reflect. I hope they felt proud to be the subjects of research on the cutting edge of what our churches have been able to do in the pandemic. I closed each conversation with praise for their work and their successes, and assurances that their future would unfold well given the way they approached church life. I told them that lessons I learned from them would be useful to all congregations as I consulted with them to plan their reopenings. I have already started incorporating the three qualities for effective congregations that I extrapolated from the research into my own work writing and speaking as a UU congregational consultant, because it was so well supported by the interviews.

CHAPTER ONE  
MEET THE ORGANIZATIONS

Borderlands Unitarian Universalists

Borderlands UU is an approximately 100-member congregation in Amado, Arizona, in the Southeast corner of the state. They were brought to my attention by a colleague in the Pacific Western Region both for the work they themselves had done in 2020 and for their engagement in the Baja 4 group, a collection of four UU congregations<sup>1</sup> around the Tucson area who collaborate on worship and other outreach and justice efforts. In our interview, you can see how the changes and actions that Borderlands UU has taken interact with, rely upon, and are enhanced by the larger collaborative process.

Rev. Matthew Funke Crary first shared how Borderland UU's very successful pre-pandemic February 2020 pledge drive, themed "Blessed Unrest," captured not only funds but a sense of agitation in the community. A previous time of developmental ministry had led to a well-formed congregational structure and to their calling Crary, their first settled minister. The congregation had changed their name a few years previously to Borderlands UU, in part because they are located near the US border with Mexico, "but while we recognize this geopolitical reality, we really are more interested in the borderlands in our own hearts."<sup>2</sup> "We knew it was a name change for identity purposes

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<sup>1</sup> The four congregations are Sky Island UUs in Sierra Vista, AZ, Mountain Vista UU in Tucson, AZ, Borderlands UU and the UU Church of Tucson.

<sup>2</sup> To make things simpler I will quote interview participants without attribution. I have adjusted some of the language for better readability. You can see the list of interview participants and their roles in Appendix C.

but we didn't realize it was going to shed light on our purpose." When the pandemic struck, the congregation was already on the move towards enacting this sense of mission.

I'm a relatively new member of this congregation, and when I came into it, I immediately got the picture that this was an evolving congregation to begin with...I was trying to decide what we were doing that was a response to the pandemic, as opposed to differentiate it from the fact that we have an ongoing evolution taking place at the church. And I have to say that I came down on the side of saying I would be reluctant to make a determination of what was the impetus because I think some of these things obviously come out of the inability to meet. And so we focused on that, but the idea of enhancing the connections among the members was present before the pandemic.

Because of this strong sense of mission and a desire to connect, Borderlands UU had two initial responses to the pandemic closing. The first was to collaborate with the Baja 4 group to create online worship together. They describe their first few efforts as very amateur – “don't go looking at the first one, guys” – but with the help of a skilled volunteer they were able to increase the professionalization and efficacy of the recorded worship services. They have continued to hire shared staff to aid in the Baja 4 collective effort – a music coordinator, a ministerial intern – and the staff of the existing four congregations help each week as well.

The second immediate initiative at Borderlands was the creation of the Borderlands UU Broadcast, or BUUB<sup>3</sup>. BUUB is essentially email that points to a daily activity:

- Monday Meditation

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<sup>3</sup> If you are new to Unitarian Universalism now may be a good time to adjust to the fact that nearly all our acronyms manage to have two Us in them. I apologize on behalf of the faith.

- Tuesday Truths: This included a poll to gauge and report the community's experiences in early pandemic; now replaced by Tasty Tuesday, a collection of recipes that may become a community cookbook

- Wednesday Weekly: Internal congregational information

- Thursday Thriving: Individual testimonies of thriving during this time

- Friday Fellowship: Checking in with partner organizations who have been beneficiaries of sharing-the-Sunday-plate charity to see how they are faring and what they need

- Saturday Sabbath: A ritual or simple practice

- Sunday Service: The link to the recorded service as well as to the Fellowship Hour to follow. The Fellowship Hour is a Borderlands UU-only experience that opens with the bell that traditionally starts their worship, a chalice lighting<sup>4</sup>, and a time for personal sharing. New community rituals have emerged from this fellowship time, such as everyone waving at the screen when anyone says, 'good morning'. The Fellowship time lasts as long as it needs to and ends with a pastoral reflection and the extinguishing of the chalice.

It may seem curious to think of broadcast email as a notable innovation, but I share the interviewees' certainty that it is. In my early days of wondering about the parameters of this project, a colleague at the UUA shared a change that had happened in the staff group that she leads. She said that before the pandemic, the location of our office where most everyone worked every day was what this colleague described as 'the center'

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<sup>4</sup> Lighting a chalice, the symbol of Unitarian Universalism, is a standard opening for our worship services.



of the staff group, the thing that told everyone that they were present and that they belonged. Once everyone had to work from their homes instead, the center shifted, and a daily email, whose authorship changed each day, became the center. This reminded me of our churches, where the habit of physically appearing at a location on Sunday morning had been the de facto ‘center’ of most of our communities. What happens when that center is no longer available?

This conversation led to the creation of my secondary interview question “How would you define the center of your community?” which I asked the Borderlands UU interviewees. They agreed that the center had shifted from Sunday morning to BUUB. They elaborated that although the BUUB is popular – they get around 250 openings each week, whereas Rev. Crary said he had never led any in-person worship with more than 130 attendees at the very most – no one particular day of the email’s offerings is the most popular. Every person seems to like some of the days, and they are all evenly popular, but no-one ‘does’ all the days. Each day speaks to a different population. The center is broader than it was, and now Borderlands UU is serving more people.

Appealing to a range of populations is an important change because our Sunday morning experience appeals to a limited set of people, those who are available at the time, can get themselves to the location, and for whom sitting in a room with a crowd listening and singing is appealing or possible. Creating a range of ways to engage with the faith, plus making the Sunday offering available to anyone’s schedule, has expanded Borderland UUs’ reach by at least double the membership.

Borderlands UU was mission focused and ready to act before the pandemic began. Once forced into quarantine, they were nimble enough to create new programs

and procedures out of their established mission and structure, which were themselves nimble enough to accommodate a massive change in the environment. Having done this in 2020 they are even more prepared to continue to do it in the future, which bodes well for the community and partnership work they were feeling called to before the pandemic began and hope to restart soon. Their mission focus and nimbleness are tools that can lead them wherever the conditions and times call them to go. The Baja 4 partnership enhances all this potential by adding additional skills, resources and critical mass when needed<sup>5</sup>.

#### CommUUnity<sup>6</sup> Creek Middle School Camp, Online

The Central East Region of the Unitarian Universalist Association<sup>7</sup> has a strong youth program managed by Ms. Shannon Harper, whom I supervise. Traditionally the region's youth programming is held in person, often in the form of summer camps or weekend experiences. All of this needed to be transformed to respond to the quarantine.

In the summer of 2020 Ms. Harper orchestrated an online summer camp experience for middle schoolers which was spectacularly successful and popular, surprising Ms. Harper. The need to start from scratch, caused by the pandemic, led to significant new learnings. The fact that we were pressed into creating some sort of program for the summer of 2020 made the region experiment faster than most

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<sup>5</sup> For example, the Baja 4 group taking the antiracism course Beloved Conversations Virtual together created an opportunity for deepening in anti-oppressive work that Borderlands UU had not been ready to tackle on their own - the collaboration has led to needed anti-oppression training that wouldn't have otherwise happened.

<sup>6</sup> See what I mean about the U's?

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.uua.org/regions>

congregations who were still reeling and disoriented through the spring when planning occurs.

Truth be told, our youth programming was ripe for a shift anyway, but change had been slow in coming. Ms. Harper attributes the success of the new middle school program to a couple of foundational shifts that were necessitated by the Covid19 quarantine restrictions: the understanding that she had to start from scratch, and her invitation to her high school and adult staff to create the new plan with her.

I had never done a middle school camp before...I could imagine how that camp would have gone, so there are comparisons I can make about how we typically would have done things like this, but then there was what we actually did. The first thing that was big was that I brought on the staff really early on from the beginning before I even had an idea of what this was going to be like. I thought okay, we're going to do a week, but I didn't know what the schedule was or what kind of content we were going to have or anything...the staff actually created that with me. We had the high school staff really get into their middle school selves and think back to what it was like in middle school so we were able to draw on that – 'this is what I needed, this is what would have interested me' – rather than just adults [saying] this is how we know how to do it...they had such great ideas I wouldn't have thought of like doing the escape room and doing the badges, and thinking about what middle schoolers can handle, how much online and offline time, that kind of thing.

And later:

It was incredibly freeing to not be able to use the structures that we always use. There's a formula that I use with in person events. There's slightly different formulas based on how long it is, but there is a formula, and it's been really freeing to be able to go chuck in the formula all together [and ask] what do we really need in this moment. That's probably the biggest thing I want to hold on to when we go back in person: Let's chuck it. [Do] what is actually needed, instead of 'this is the formula we know, this is the tried-and-true formula that we know works, so let's keep doing it.' That's youth ministry for the last 20 years....We've just been using the same formula for youth group and now it's 2020. It's not working anymore. They aren't coming.

Because of the disruption of the quarantine, the work of revisiting the question of core purpose and accessing stakeholder creativity to answer those questions became

essential, which lead to a revamping based in up-to-the-minute relevance and responsiveness to stakeholder needs.

This was not the only learning. The camp itself reached a whole new population of youth. Attending previous youth programming usually involved spending a long period of time in person with strangers in a new place and this appealed to an extroverted kind of crowd. The new online experience appealed to those kids and also a newly reached crowd of shyer, more introverted youth along with those with sensory sensitivities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, general scheduling complications, busier parents, and more. “Something I’ve thought about for a while is that our typical program is designed for kids who ...know how to handle themselves in an extroverted world and we haven’t really taken into consideration the people who aren’t like that, and our programs do not make those people happy.” Further, youth leaders from groups who did not enjoy the previous model are now coming forth and are helping to shape other youth programming so that there can be programs that youth with a broader range of preferences can enjoy. The landscape of planning is more inclusive now and the participants are more diverse and better served as a result.

Ms. Harper lists a series of other changes that she sees as critical to bring into the post-pandemic world of youth programming. These changes have direct applications to congregations. Instead of creating new set formulas for a program – a ‘recipe to follow’ – in the future she will create a set of questions to be answered to create the program. This way the evolving new needs of the leaders, participants and environment are always centered.

Ms. Harper included care of the staff and organizers as a key part of the success of the new program:

The experience of my staff was just as important to me as the campers who were paying for it. I would tell the youth and adult staff that just because you're getting paid to do this doesn't mean you can be stressed and having anxiety and you cannot take care of yourself. Actually your experience is just as important as the people who are paying for us to do this. We have to design something that actually not just takes care of you but excites you, things that you want to do, things you are passionate about doing, because it's going to make the experience better.

I think of typical congregational leadership experiences which somehow change a positive lay experience into a stressful, isolating and non-spiritual leadership experience. Religious professionals themselves have high rates of burnout and self-destructive behavior. What would happen if all religious programming followed a similar protocol to this camp and served organizers and participants alike, feeding and inspiring the leaders along with the laity?

Another lesson has to do with challenging the perfectionism and the impulse to control that have colored previous youth program design and execution. Ms. Harper encourages congregational youth program organizers to worry less about planning for everything. Anticipating every event is impossible. Rather than predicting everything that could happen and creating rubrics of responses to each imagined scenario, she suggests that the leaders make the best possible decision they can in the face of a new situation and document everything to be transparent. This can be a cultural change for leaders because they tend to want to control outcomes and unknowns through concrete and thorough planning. Before the pandemic, it was an uphill climb to convince them that managing the unexpected in the moment and learning from it is an important part of the community experience. She expects it will be an easier sell after the disruption of this

time. No-one could have planned for a global pandemic's effect on youth church programming.

Mostly, Ms. Harper says that the pandemic has given her permission to try out some of her most creative ideas. Despite general pre-pandemic declines in the participation and enthusiasm of UU youth programming and a widely shared sense that a complete overhaul needed to happen, it was the disruption of the pandemic that pushed everyone into work that had to be done. The new landscape is perfect for Ms. Harper:

I will say I think the pandemic and having to do things differently and having to talk about things differently has really just opened up for me things that I was already thinking about but felt like was hard to talk about [with]in the structures we had. So it's like seeds that have been planted in me about ways of doing things that now that there is the pandemic I'm like, oh, you're going for it.

#### First Unitarian Universalist Church of Indiana, PA

First UU Church of Indiana, Pennsylvania is an 80+ member church located a bit more than an hour east of Pittsburgh and was recommended for this project because they had responded to the pandemic in nimble ways. First UU was able to move to online worship and online religious education for children nearly immediately after quarantine because, much like in the example of the middle school camp, the seed and need were already there:

The congregation was already primed to do something years before, we wanted to do satellite congregations and we were able to install equipment to do that but then we never found any satellites. We already had in our mind that people could come not in person. We would have eventually figured it out but it would have taken a lot longer... Yeah, we were kind of already in the mood.

The two staff people reported their ability to pivot into an online format with some pride ("I only slept three hours in 48 but also we didn't miss a single Sunday"). They adjusted quickly to new attendance challenges like not knowing which or how many children were going to attend religious education classes on any given Sunday or

people's inability to commit to programming in the same patterns as before, for example preferring to do a class weekly for three weeks rather than monthly for three months.

First UU showed a strong willingness and ability to start and stop programming based on where the energy was shifting, and a curiosity-centered and non-defensive reaction to surprisingly high or low interest in church events both familiar and new.

They also note that in the process their volunteer pool shrank considerably:

When I had my four classes I had lots of volunteers...whereas because of the whole beginning of the [pandemic] situation not knowing if people were losing work or having to go to work or where the kids were going to be...I don't have any volunteers other than my wife. I do not want to put the burden on others unless they volunteer. When we go in person that will be something that will change structurally but right now I'm not going to put that burden on them, I will take that for them.

We talked about this shrinking diversity of people involved in planning due to the motivated intervention of competent staff people and the emergency nature of the early days of the pandemic:

We had more and more The Rev. Elizabeth Show [on Sunday mornings] which I kind of repeatedly said was not my preference, how do we get out of this loop. I'm excited we're getting the worship committee back on board to have a larger diversity of voices in each and every one of our worship services.

This shrinking diversity was apparent in other ways as well. Families, who spent all week managing multiple Zoom screen obligations, were less likely to then participate in Zoom based church on Sundays than older populations, so the effect could be a worship service with only "tiny boxes of older white people<sup>8</sup>."

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<sup>8</sup> Zoom video programming has arisen as the primary video system used to connect people virtually during the quarantine, and the term "zoom call" is used even when the call is on another platform. When many people are on Zoom or a similar platform together, the effect can be a screen full of squares with faces showing in each, like the 1970s television show *Hollywood Squares*.

As is the case with several of the interviewees, First UU is sharing worship by participating in the ‘Pittsburgh cluster’ of worship collaboration with six or so other congregations, many of which are lay led. As one of the largest congregations participating, First UU volunteers to host the entire cluster in their online service once a month. This increases their attendance by about 80% and allows for a sense of a larger community, even if they do not actually spend much additional or closer time with the members of the other congregations. When I asked if they were likely to continue with that partnership there was some hesitation:

Maybe not every month – it [does] widen all our opportunities – but I think some of the congregations in the cluster are really looking forward to being back together and we definitely found that during my summer break. We used just the shared pulpit for a month, and that was hard on people. I got feedback from a bunch of folks that it felt like going to a new church – there was just an overwhelming number of new people. I think in some ways being together while using the shared pulpit for a sermon but having our own musicians and joys and concerns and such may actually ameliorate that problem. I think it will be a sort of third way and different from either of those two things that we’ve done with solo independent worship versus shared full worship. My instinct is that we probably don’t all want to gather in the sanctuary to watch someone on Zoom for an hour, but this third way where there’s a shared element and then independent pieces surrounding it might be wonderful.

This comment demonstrates the continuing interest in and need for a sense of one’s own community. First UU feels that it has been holding together well because they retained that sense of community throughout all the forced changes of the quarantine. Children who had known each other their whole lives continued to show up for church to see each other after being in online classes all week. Congregants looked forward to spending time together in worship and the ones who were not in worship were still communicating through Facebook and other means:

I still think community is really big for us. I’m sure all churches feel that way but I feel like because of where we live in this very conservative area, the church is our safe place and even all the people who have not been there all year, they will



show up when we open our doors. I've been really impressed at watching the ways that our community has been tracking itself and one another. [There are people who] have not attended a single thing since the pandemic started and feel super connected to the church because people reach out on Facebook and have conversations and have texted to check in and things. Really, this community holds itself in a network in a way that is pretty powerful.

It seems clear that this sense of community, within an environment of several layers of external health or political threat, was a sort of glue that held the congregation together, more so than any sort of programming that the congregation might offer. This enduring sense of the place did not seem reliant on the services the congregation provided but more on the ethos that it generated for its people, whether frequent attendees or not.

#### Northeast Wisconsin Group

This group of small congregations<sup>9</sup> sharing one minister in northeast Wisconsin are primarily bound by the worship and small group ministry of that minister, Rev. Jim Coakley. Although the percentages have shifted somewhat and continue to shift as congregational financial situations change, Rev. Coakley is hired half time at one congregation and quarter time at two more. The goal is to keep Rev. Coakley at a full-time status through whatever means necessary, so the congregations and minister are also considering how to monetize his services so that other smaller congregations nearby might be able to purchase the particular ministry they need and contribute to the full-time job as well.

When the congregations closed their doors Rev. Coakley recognized that community is core to these small congregations and so the shared weekly worship is

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<sup>9</sup> The four congregations are the UU Fellowship of Door County in Ephraim, WI; Open Circle Unitarian Universalist in Fond du Lac, WI; The Point Fellowship in Stevens Point, WI; and Green Bay Area UU Fellowship in Green Bay, WI.

organized so that the shared content such as music, readings and sermon are gathered at the beginning of the service and then the congregations are split into breakout rooms by congregation for a time of facilitator-run interpersonal sharing. The shared content often lasts 45 minutes and the breakout time another hour, so the participants are often spending nearly two hours at virtual church each Sunday. They do this in a high-tech/low-tech combination: they have hired a tech person to facilitate the Sunday mornings, and each participant adjusts their Zoom name to add the initials of their congregation so the tech person can assign them their proper room.

More than even most congregations, these four are feeling the benefits of remote church. The weather in northeastern Wisconsin is bad and the driving distances great. The average age of the congregants is high; their willingness to drive at night is shrinking. They have a snowbird population who leaves the state during the winter months but who are participating remotely in worship, book clubs, discussion groups, affinity groups and more. They have some physically frail and terminally ill members who can connect more reliably online. Everyone on the call acknowledged that they are reaping the benefits of these virtual connections even while they were specific about missing the physical Sunday experience that went beyond the programming and pointed back to the importance of community to the members.

In addition to the conveniences of remote church in a wintry place, many interviewees spoke to the import of finding a critical mass for programming which was not available previously:

I like that the programming has become kind of communal...when someone wants to do a book group or someone wants to do a movie night it's hard to get maybe more than three people to show up because you really only have maybe 30 regulars...if two people from Green Bay join in and two people from Open Circle

and two people from Stevens Point and two from Door County, suddenly you have a group that feels like a group rather than something that feels like a waste of resources. If someone is going to put forth the effort to pick a book and have discussion questions and whatever, and two people show up, you maybe feel a little defeated. But if you get a few people from each little congregation, and then there's ten of us together...it suddenly feels again like you're validated in the interest you have in connecting with other people.

This critical mass allows a smaller congregation to implement its programming ideas and expand its offerings to potentially include a wider audience, which can be important in attracting and serving a broader range of communities.

I was curious about these four congregations' choice of collaboration when in theory the church could collaborate with any community anywhere in the world. Part of the reason for the partnership is the glue that Rev. Coakley has provided with his personal congregational relationships. I was curious as to whether there were also cultural similarities between the churches that made this collaboration more appealing than combining worship with congregations in, say, Texas. Rev. Coakley did refer to these congregations' similar origin stories as lay-led fellowships in Wisconsin. For several of them, online church has brought a notable increase in professional ministerial presence. But it seems that the glue that connects them has less to do with history or location than it does with their size. They refer to a nearby large Wisconsin congregation in the quote below:

Fox Valley got their act together right away [after the closures]. It seemed like they extended an invitation, when we shut down and couldn't meet in person, to join them with their services, and they were doing Zoom right away. So we did that, and it was nice, it was 'Oh good, you don't have to worry about that from a Sunday service perspective' and of course we all thought we'd be together [again] in no time. And then what was becoming clear was that [getting back together] wasn't going to happen, and then the reality was we can't do this, this isn't sustainable for us as a congregation, because we're not ourselves at all. There was no opportunity for us to meet. We're merely passively watching another service and it could be anywhere. Fox Valley was a catalyst in some ways. It was both the

model and the window for us to realize that this wasn't [working] and we had to figure out something [else.]

Rev. Coakley was likely correct in identifying community bonding as central to the success of the online experiment, especially when we compare the success of the Wisconsin group's collective worship with that of Indiana, above, where that sense of 'visiting a new church' rather than trying a new form of their own church is still very present. The Wisconsin congregations feel they are attending their own churches. They are just doing so in a novel way.

The collaboration with each other and with professional ministry has expanded the faith horizons of the congregations who have been lay led longer and whose connection with Unitarian Universalist religion is less robust. The president of Door County Fellowship says that they were founded by a group of people who love the arts and at times find more connection in the pursuit of those arts than they do with Unitarian Universalism. This pandemic congregational collaboration has exposed them to more UU theology, practices and systems, which allowed the 40-year-tenure UU on the call to not be the only link connecting the Fellowship to the faith. The congregation has not yet chosen to continue to be closer to Unitarian Universalism, but the foundation for such a choice has been laid by the collaboration of the Wisconsin Group.

The new landscape forged by Covid19 had also encouraged some innovations in the worship service itself. Rev. Coakley has adjusted the worship element intended to reach children, which previously had been aimed at the developmental stage of the early reader by including a reading from a picture book. With the onset of the pandemic and online schooling, early readers were not showing up to virtual church, which begged the question of to whom to target this educational segment. Rev. Coakley pivoted away from

picture book reading to a true religious educational time for all ages where he provides tutorials with the aid of internet videos on concepts like impermanence, Stoicism, and resilience that are covered in the rest of the service. He can then target the educational moment to different age groups and include them in the materials that are distributed to classes and families later in the week. This is another example of the crisis forcing changes that needed to happen anyway, because now this element truly is for all ages and can be accessed at whatever time is convenient.

The Northeast Wisconsin Group is a wonderful example of a working partnership that contributes to the vitality of Unitarian Universalism in that corner of the state. The remote collaboration solves multiple problems that existed pre-pandemic at once. As the interviewees said, it is hard to imagine them returning to a fully in-person religious experience even when they can; this collaboration has led to greater vitality and greater ease.

### The Potomac Partnership

The Potomac Partnership is comprised of three large<sup>10</sup> Unitarian Universalist congregations in the Washington, DC metro area. Their senior ministers began talking together about the potential of partnership years ago as each became more and more aware of the growing unfeasibility of the congregational model at which they were so successful in the 20th century. The clergy meetings led to shared staff retreats and eventually to leadership meetings:

[The leadership were] five people from each of our congregations that we appointed without any permission from anyone to do it – we just did it. They

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<sup>10</sup> In 2020 River Road UU Congregation in Bethesda had about 500 members, the UU Congregation of Fairfax in Oakton, VA about 650 and Cedar Lane UU Church in Bethesda, MD about 750.

came together as a team, and they started talking and thinking and advising about what it would mean for us to work together more closely, and then we had a leadership retreat for all of our leaders together – almost 30 some odd people. [It was an] opportunity for us to have discussions about a variety of topics...like stewardship and annual campaign, pandemic programming and governance and so forth. I think the opportunity provided...lay leaders over a sustained period of time to really have some rich deepening conversations about what it means to be in this together and what are our possibilities, what are our challenges, and what is it that we are looking towards coming out of all this, recognizing that the inside of the church as an institution that we have long clung to is dead. It has been dying, but [the pandemic] has pretty much put the nail in the coffin and trying to continue to preserve that institution in this midst of all this, and out of this, is going to be a fatal enterprise. We are being forced to be reborn to something that we don't know what it is. This group never really questioned that premise.

Now nearly a year into the pandemic the Potomac Partnership shares worship on a rotating basis, adult religious education programming, music expertise and events, leadership meetings, trainings, youth activities and more.

The leadership group's deep work has led to additional initiatives. The leaders of the three church Boards now meet regularly. There have been explorations around the idea of staff sharing as staff teams shift. A subgroup launched a storytelling project. Groups of interviewers are talking to each others' members to find out what brought them to their church, what keeps them there, what they are excited about and what they yearn for in the future. Data interpretation and reporting on the storytelling is yet to come, but the clergy are all excited about the way in which this information will inform a new sense of mission in coming years. The pandemic has allowed for some accelerated execution of their plans– it is much easier to share worship when everyone is remote anyway, for example – but the seeds of the collaboration were firmly planted before the quarantine began.

The pandemic has made several key differences, however. One is in 'loosening ministers' egos':

...because we're all exhausted and we have to collaborate in order to keep going and we have to cross pollinate in order to keep producing as much as is needed in content...

Another major change is the way the Partnership lives in the imagination of the lay members:

They know that there is a way to respond creatively [to the future] instead of just anxiously so that's good, to feel like we can be a part of something [new] instead of feeling like we're failing at what we used to be.

And although they discussed for years the potential benefits of spending more time with neighboring congregations, being forced into doing it has been beneficial to each congregation:

Our DNA is so wrapped around our own particular [congregational] cultures ...one of the best things about this is that it's exposed people to other Unitarian Universalists, so people will say 'oh they do it exactly the same way we do, or oh they do it differently than we do, and we're not going to die if we look or see or do it differently. Some people have really leaned into that, which is wonderful because they understand that there are appropriate boundaries they can cross that they never even knew existed.

A couple of difficult dynamics that were problematic in the past simply do not seem to matter now and that is a refreshing change for the clergy. One dynamic is unnecessarily charged interactions between River Road and Cedar Lane because River Road is an offshoot of Cedar Lane. That dynamic is gone now:

What has been wonderful to see is some of those things just got pushed aside – I'm not saying that they got addressed. They just don't seem to matter any more.

Another difficult dynamic that may have gotten pushed to the side is the resistance to the work of dismantling white supremacy culture. In Unitarian Universalism, that resistance can take the form of passive disinterest or active defiance or some combination of those poles, and all three of these congregations have had some form of it. It's something that one of the clergy, who immigrated to the U.S. from India,

tackled head on with the initial leadership team. His speech was described by another clergy person:

[He] made an impassioned speech at one of our beginning leadership sessions that said if we don't seriously address the issues of white supremacy in our congregations and in the world then I'm done. It was the understanding that if we're not mission focused and radically inclusive in the work that we're doing to overcome systems of oppression and white supremacy then what's the point of the 21st century church. That was the message to our leadership. And the Board is like 'nope, we're done centering [the resisters], we're moving on'. That's because of that speech. That's because in that leadership group we have made a commitment to the mission of the future. I feel it inside of myself as well. It's like I'm not interested in this conversation [about whether or not to do anti oppression work] anymore, like another thing that has shoved aside.

There may have once been a fear among laity or the clergy that spending time with each other's ministers would lead to dissatisfaction with their own, but that fear has been laid to rest by the actual experience. All three congregations love seeing each of the three senior clergy and their teams at work:

What I am seeing is a genuine appreciation for the gifts that ministers bring that may be particularly well suited to the setting that we [each] serve [but] are there for others as well...during the pandemic there's such a desperate hunger to interpret the events of the day that our congregations [are] now newly aware of the need for ministers as public theologians and are looking for us to do that much more. The Potomac Partnership allows [the congregations] to have exposure to all of us doing public theology, all three of us ministry teams, as opposed to just a particular angle one of us might take on, and that's a good thing.

This fact helps the clergy imagine a possibility down the road of merging the ministry teams so that each minister gets to do what they are best suited for and best enjoy, which could make the profession more enjoyable and burnout less likely.

The clergy of the Potomac Partnership cannot predict what is next for their congregations but are delighted at the newfound nimbleness that they are seeing in their laity as they finally work on changes that have been looming for some time:

[I appreciate] the ability to think as creatively as we are about the ways that the 21st century church is different than the 20th century church...we were fiscally



comfortable enough before the pandemic that there wasn't a strong enough impetus for us to take that work seriously. It seemed like an abstraction that did not wholly apply to us. And it's only during pandemic time that real reflection on the 21st century church has come home to be our job. I do think that part of what we're doing is laying emotional and infrastructure groundwork for 15 or 20 years from now when it will be even more striking that none of the way that we currently do things will work. Our people will be better prepared, emotionally and structurally, to meet the dissolution of the 20th century church than they were before. Is that depressing or hopeful, I don't know. I don't know why I think it's hopeful. We will almost certainly come back to the sanctuary in some degree of fiscal crisis. Going back to normal will not fiscally be an option. And I think our Boards know that. What continues after we're back in the sanctuary is the need to respond creatively instead of just anxiously to the fiscal and structural realities of the 21st century church. We do not know what our base will look like. We don't even know what our attendance patterns are going to look like. We have no idea how many children will come back. We don't have the option to try to recreate a broken wheel that we were working so hard to keep relying on before the pandemic because the money will not be there, so the patterns will not be the same.

And the practice in adjusting and becoming accustomed to change has served them well:

This partnership has definitely impacted [the laity's] ability to think outside their box and embrace nimbleness, which is not a Cedar Lane trait. It's not a River Road trait either. Competence is a River Road trait, not nimbleness. If these congregations through collaboration can achieve a higher degree of nimbleness, anyone short of a toxic mess of a congregation can. We are a great case study in how to move institutions that are not inherently nimble further down the road.

#### The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Plattsburgh, NY

The UU Fellowship of Plattsburgh is another small congregation in the Central East Region that my staff brought to my attention for this project because of the inventive ways they had been responding to the quarantine. Plattsburgh uses their core understanding of their purpose to help them change their operating structures to be effective in this new pandemic reality.

It began with the first Sunday they closed. Their minister, Rev. Guerrier, had asked the Board to decide which community disease rate indicators would lead them to close; when those indicators appeared two days later they were prepared to act.

I think our immediate feeling was we have to hold the congregation together, how do we hold ourselves together, and the worship service has been the key. We stripped it down to what seemed most essential in worship and what the purpose was. We had to really rethink. We quickly decided that what we wanted to focus on was people's connections with one another. That's why we decided that there was no question other than doing it live.

This continued conversation about what mattered most in worship helped inform the structure of worship as well:

We wanted to give space to the people. More to the people than to the presenters. So we really started there with the heart of it being joys and sorrows, and no sermon. It's really been people first. And the people are the message, put it that way. We quickly moved to a model where we want it to be very relevant, and so at the beginning deciding [not until] Thursday what the focus of the Sunday service would be. It's staying close to the people and staying close to what is alive in the world. And it's easier to make things more relevant to people in their home versus being in the sanctuary and saying okay now take it out into your lives. People are in their lives.

Things have changed back a bit since those beginning days – now there are short sermons and planning has a longer range. But the shifts to having Rev. Guerrier in the pulpit three times a month rather than once, keeping worship elements community focused, and planning worship very close to Sunday to stay relevant, has led to more robust worship attendance online than they had ever had in the sanctuary.

The Plattsburgh leadership also wanted worship to provide practical tools – “I felt like the community needs to not just be the place that people come back to as a touchstone but needs to be something that equips us all to go forward” – so a focus on a wide variety of spiritual practices offered by a range of people has become integral. The

leaders have been gratified to witness the increased comfort with the notion of spiritual practice. There is now something for everybody.

This newer attention to the purpose of worship and what people will take away from it has spread to other areas of the church as well. The Board is also focusing on purpose, asking what the point is of their work. And broader than that:

We needed to rethink what is church anyway and the pandemic has just forced us to do that. So we can rethink everything, you know, including all of our organizational structures. Why do we do this this way and what purpose is it serving and should we do it a different way.

A recent retreat, traditionally just for leaders, was opened to the entire congregation, and people broke into groups of two or three people for intimate conversations about what matters most at church. This was so popular that a new initiative called Think Tank was started where people could continue to share ideas about purpose in more intimate settings. Rather than relying on the former system of regularly scheduled, low energy council gatherings to do strategic planning, the Think Tanks were scheduled at a variety of times for all sorts of participants and has encouraged conversations like how they could bring more fun to the Fellowship. Because of the popularity of those Think Tanks the council meetings have gone down to meeting just quarterly, freeing leadership time for the more energetic monthly Think Tank initiative that brings many more voices into imaginative leadership.

Other changes, some of which were started before the pandemic, included things like not having committee chairs anymore, not worrying about taking and recording meeting minutes, and sharing leadership roles like the current co-Presidents:

What people are able to contribute at any given time really came up and emerged and was addressed and needs further discussion. There is this kind of energy that people have that is going to ebb and flow, we're going to have our bio rhythms that may or may not coincide with what we're responsible for doing. [The two co-

Presidents] have been in good communication but we've also expanded a lot of the leadership to the executive committee as well, just as a way of getting organized and having more brains to draw upon in order to flesh out the agenda.

Relying less on writing everything down, sharing leadership so people can take shifts, and being more attuned to the changing needs of the leaders are elements in dismantling white supremacy culture<sup>11</sup> that many UU congregations have taken on in recent years. Plattsburgh has committed to this work, and years ago their Black Lives Matter committee held learning circles for the congregation to increase their anti-oppression competencies. A situation with an African American man pulling back from the congregation for some time because his experiences with racism there were not taken seriously enough was a learning moment for the congregation. "Prior to the pandemic we frequently gave lip service to the fact that we are committed to being engaged in social justice," I was told, but this pandemic time of focus on 'what matters' combined with their prior education and the concurrent national explosion of racial unrest led to an uptick of both racial justice work and election activism spurred by the UUA's 2020 election campaign, UU the Vote.<sup>12</sup> Many Plattsburgh members participated in church-based UU the Vote initiatives and this work drew in participants from the wider community as well.

When I asked what the leadership sees the future holding, they were very clear that staying relevant and making needed changes were all going to play a large part. Despite a clear desire to gather again, their aging population in a location with bad

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<sup>11</sup> UUs have been broadly working with Tema Okun and Kenneth Jones' overview of the characteristics of white supremacy culture which can be seen here: <http://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/characteristics.html>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.uuthevote.org/>

winters makes it seem clear that keeping a lot of the work of the church on Zoom makes sense. Their focus on getting more voices into the decision-making pool means that the flexibility that comes with meeting remotely will be appealing down the road. Their attention to whether and how much the church is a physical place will have repercussions in the future as they continue to choose the most relevant and most purposeful actions.

### In Summary

There are differences in the ways these six organizations chose to react to the pandemic but there are also through lines that point in similar directions. When I combine these testimonials with research from the non-profit and public institution worlds about what makes for the most effective organizations, a pattern emerges. Effective organizations are centered on mission. They are nimble and responsive. And they make room for the voices of all involved to have a space at the decision-making and strategic planning tables. This implies the necessary work of removing the barriers that keep people with marginalized identities from being able to share their perspectives.

Congregations are not just effective organizations; they are also religious institutions – which means they provide the means to take one’s personal faith out into the world for action. This is a definition of public theology. Before I explore some of the research about effective organizations let us look at some definitions of ‘public theology’ that are particularly applicable to the Unitarian Universalist context.

## INTERLUDE

### “SHOW US WHAT THEOLOGY LOOKS LIKE”

The quote above, shouted in the streets in Ferguson, Missouri as the Black Lives Matter movement was being born,<sup>1</sup> is a clever rephrasing of the term ‘public theology’. In their overview of the academic field of public theology, Kim and Day refer to a variety of theologians and academics who have explored the topic, because “increasingly there is interest in theology that is public... Theologian Linell Cady has suggested that perhaps this burgeoning theological movement is a corrective to theologies that have been individualistic, parochial and inaccessible to those outside of the world of academic theology.”

Although different and perhaps not terribly distinct definitions of public theology are floated about the academy, “generally public theology refers to the church reflectively engaging with those within and outside its institutions on issues of common interest and for the common good.”<sup>2</sup> Theologian E. Harold Brietenberg, Jr. defines it this way: “Public theology is ...theologically informed public discourse about public issues, addressed to the church, synagogue, mosque, temple or other religious body, as well as the larger public or publics...” David Tracy, one of the most definitive writers on public theology, says that “theology needs to engage three publics: the church, the academy, and society at large.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sebastian Kim and Katie Day, eds. *A Companion to Public Theology*. (London; Boston: Brill, 2017,) 1.

<sup>2</sup> Kim and Day, *Companion*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Kim and Day, *Companion*, 3.

These definitions take on shape when we look at the optimal functioning of an everyday Unitarian Universalist congregation, especially those in the throes of response to a global catastrophe like a pandemic that has required closure and quarantine. Can the community itself, and the way the people within its walls engage with each other, be an act of public theology? Can the Unitarian Universalist effort to be a location and model of Beloved Community, thereby an effective (UU) organization, be an act of public theology in and of itself?

In the academy's attempt to define the 'public' of public theology, Scottish theologian Andrew R. Morton contributed the following:

...publics might share language but are essentially those social spaces where dialogue occurs. They cohere in the midst of, and because of, the difference and even conflict they accommodate. [Morton:] '...the whole thing is pervaded by questioning, doubting and challenging as well as asserting, confirming and agreeing' ... It is clear from this paradigm that democratic participation is essential to publics ...and therefore to public theology.<sup>4</sup>

The makeup of a Unitarian Universalist congregation is held together by our Principles (Appendix A). These insist on the inherent worth and dignity of every person and call for an individual, responsible search for truth and meaning, necessarily leading to a variety of truths being brought to the same community. The Principles also call for democratic processes in our functioning, understanding that what impacts one of us affects us all. By Morton's definition, a Unitarian Universalist congregation, questioning, doubting, challenging, confirming and agreeing by virtue of democracy, is inherently already a public theological space.

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<sup>4</sup> Kim and Day, *Companion*, 12.

Does effective Unitarian Universalist congregational functioning already show what our theology looks like?

This is why the question of organizational effectiveness looms so large in my concept of public theology. Presumably there is better and worse public theology. If our very congregations' operations are locations for public theology, then every time one of our congregations tilts to the side of irreconcilable conflict, every time a congregation forgets what its purpose is, and every time one of our congregations chooses the ease of silencing some voices to make its decision-making process smoother, the incarnation of our theology fails along with our failure to be a location and model of Beloved Community in and to the world. To my mind, an ineffective Unitarian Universalist congregation is a failure of our public theology. This is why congregational effectiveness matters to me.



## CHAPTER TWO

### THREE MARKERS OF ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

I now want to explore three ways in which religious institutions can best situate themselves for effective public impact.

The first is to emphasize and organize around an explicit *mission*. This means moving away from the implicit mission of mere congregational maintenance.

The second is to encourage *nimbleness* in structure and operation. The goal is responsiveness to the needs of the people.

The third is what I will call an *ethos of belonging*, where church structures and cultures stimulate belonging and inclusion, especially in decision making. This is the ethos that fuels Beloved Community.

### MISSION

It is easy to find organizational development research that puts the establishment of, maintenance of and attention to mission at the center of effective organizations, especially nonprofit and public ones<sup>1</sup>. Religious organizations seem to most closely

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Beaumont, "Don't Just Talk About Mission-Act With Passion!" Susan Beaumont and Associates. April 19, 2017. <http://www.susanbeaumont.com/2017/04/19/dont-just-talk-about-mission-act-with-passion/>.

Charles Coe, *Managing Public and Non Profit Institutions: Stories of Success and Failure*. New York: Routledge, 2018.

Marcus Coetzee, "The characteristics of an effective nonprofit organisation: A Critical Analysis." University of the Western Cape, January 27, 2007.

Jana L. Craft, "Common Thread: The Impact of Mission on Ethical Business Culture: A Case Study." *Journal of Business Ethics*, 2018: 149:127–145.

Light, *Innovation*.

mirror public institutions in the danger of losing attention to mission entirely, becoming “... organizations ... merely on life support, awakening to protect their turf but otherwise in a vegetative state...in essence, staying alive has become their mission.”<sup>2</sup>

This can be particularly true for Unitarian Universalist congregations, no different in form or culture than many majority-white culture, mainstream Protestant faiths. Their organizational heyday was in the post-World War Two period when our dominant white-middle-class demographic maintained lifestyles supported by one income, women were often at home and interested in running civic organizations, there was a national culture of membership, and families had many children to participate in religious life.<sup>3</sup> In this era, the establishment and maintenance of the individual congregation was authentically the mission of the congregation. Seventy years later, the demographic landscape has completely changed, yet Unitarian Universalist congregations are still caught in the structures and implicit mission of keeping the individual congregation alive. The reason for doing so has become invisible to newcomers and opaque to long time members. The time has come for the development of more explicit, contextual, and relevant missions.

Feeling a gap, in the past decade or two some of our congregations dove into an intense period of writing mission statements, but authors warn of what I might call an idolatry of the Mission Statement. Paul Light suggests that an organization would be better off avoiding a statement if it will become hardened and worshipped. Mission is more than a statement in a particular point in time; it is a constantly evolving feeling

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<sup>2</sup> Light, *Innovation*, 173.

<sup>3</sup> Carey McDonald, “Future of Faith: Unitarian Universalists in a Changing Time.” July 11, 2015. <https://smallscreen.uua.org/videos/future-of-faith-unitarian-universalists-in-a-changing-time> (accessed February 12, 2021)

about why you exist and who you serve. “If that meant penciling in a few more words here or there on the mission statement, those words were penciled in. If it meant erasing the statement entirely, then that was done.”<sup>4</sup> Mission, he says, “is more a state of mind and an ongoing question than a precise set of words that can be enshrined on a coffee room wall”<sup>5</sup> and “much more than a set of words written on paper; it is an expression of how an organization relates to the world it serves.”<sup>6</sup>

Susan Beaumont agrees. “Congregations waste precious time forming mission statements that fail to inspire action. Writing a mission statement produces clarity, but rarely generates energy. It’s time to ... start focusing on the passion that compels us to make a specific difference.”

These new missions need to be nimble and context specific, shifting with the times. “Thriving congregations understand their broad part in spreading the Good News and in loving and serving others. At the same time, they are clear about the specific ways they are called to engage those broad mandates in their local context.”<sup>7</sup> Effective organizations “make the external environment a partner in their innovativeness,”<sup>8</sup> which suggests that they are in dialogue with the world outside their doors more often than they are absorbed by themselves and their current members. Church consultant Michael Lukaszewski suggests that it is time for the church to shift its approach to potential

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<sup>4</sup> Light, *Innovation*, 173.

<sup>5</sup> Light, *Innovation*, 41.

<sup>6</sup> Light, *Innovation*, 51.

<sup>7</sup> Beaumont, “Mission.”

<sup>8</sup> Light, *Innovation*, 59.

members from “Look at us” to “Let’s talk about you,”<sup>9</sup> and one way to do that is to create a nimble, outward facing mission. You can call it passion if that feels more exciting.

Light reminds us that this sort of mission is always evolving, never finished.

Research shows that attention to mission can bridge organizational gaps between espoused and enacted values<sup>10</sup> and is more critical to organizational functioning than the organization’s structure itself. “There is no one ‘right structure,’” writes Charles Coe, “rather, the structure should fit the work being done and stakeholders’ needs. [T]he structure should facilitate (1) work performance, (2) decisionmaking, and (3) problem solving.”<sup>11</sup> This is particularly illuminating and instructive to Unitarian Universalist congregations, whose first response to fuzzy mission priorities is often to restructure their systems. Light suggests that a loose organizational structure is fine in the face of a strong mission, and that all structures need to be created to serve the mission, not the other way around.<sup>12</sup> This orientation might prove efficacious for our struggling congregations.

Sarah Birmingham Drummond speaks to the increased need for attention to mission post pandemic:

[A pastor] got the advice ‘put it where people can get it’. The first thing we must ask when reconsidering our work in this strange and unsettling time is, What is ‘it’? We must define what we seek to deliver, and then consider how to deliver it in new ways... Faith communities deliver comfort and togetherness. They also deliver challenges to think in novel ways, sometimes ways that run counter to what the secular market economy tries to convince us is true. Faith community

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Lukaszewski, "Stop Making Outreach All About You." Church Marketing Sucks. September 30, 2015. [http://churchmarketingsucks.com/2015/09/stop-making-outreach-all-about-you/?utm\\_source=Newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=March+UUA+Outreach+Revolution+Care+Package&utm\\_campaign=March+UUA+Outreach+Revolution+Care+Package](http://churchmarketingsucks.com/2015/09/stop-making-outreach-all-about-you/?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=March+UUA+Outreach+Revolution+Care+Package&utm_campaign=March+UUA+Outreach+Revolution+Care+Package).

<sup>10</sup> Craft, "Common Thread," 127–145.

<sup>11</sup> Coe, *Institutions*, 12, 22.

<sup>12</sup> Light, *Innovation*, 59, 173.

leaders would be better served by focusing attention, reflection and conversion on the 'it.' When we don't do the work of clarifying what faith communities actually are and need to be, we mistake the cart for the horse - the form for the purpose - and conflict arises...Jesus tells us, 'you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.' (John 8:32) The truth is not a delivery system. Rather, the delivery system serves the truth. It is up to religious leaders to focus communities on the truth and then adapt the delivery systems accordingly. This is a big job, but we are not the first to do it. This is not Christianity's first challenge; it's not even our first pandemic.<sup>13</sup>

We can see the centrality of mission in our interviewee organizations effectively responding to the pandemic. Borderlands UU entered the pandemic time with a clear sense of mission – Blessed Unrest – that fueled their decisions and direction in their Covid19 response. Some organizations found a mission as they responded: in various ways, the Northeast Wisconsin Group, Plattsburgh and Indiana said that keeping the community together became the understood mission of the day, the one around which every decision and action spun. I would argue that even the search for a new 21st century-appropriate mission, as we see with the Potomac Partnership, functions as a form of mission, a question around which they can gather what they will and will not do in the coming months.

Having a live sense of purpose makes any choice much easier for a congregation. Even more importantly, uncoupling the real mission from an outdated attachment to former buildings or structures allows for a burst of creativity in approach to fulfilling that mission. We see that situation clearly outlined by Ms. Harper with the CommUUnity Creek Camp, Online when she says “chuck it out.”

## **NIMBLENESS AND ITS ROLE IN CAPTURING CREATIVITY AND CREATING INNOVATION**

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<sup>13</sup> Drummond, “Supply Chains,” 73.

I did most of my literature review before the pandemic began, and one of the factors that loomed large in the research about creating an effective organization was fostering creativity and innovation. Because of the research, for this project I was preparing to propose some tips for creating an environment that maximizes both creativity and innovation and make a strong case as for why having such an environment is key to the future of the church.

Then the pandemic hit. As mentioned above, in the first weeks after the quarantine began we saw creativity and innovation in our congregations well beyond what I thought they could generate or withstand. I have already talked about the rate of change they experienced but it needs to be underscored that the ways in which they changed were novel and varied as well. The field for “what do we do now??” was wide open and lots of new people, new practices and new ways stepped in. Suddenly the question of prodding churches towards innovating seemed obsolete.

But in the midst of the changes we also saw differences in ease of execution of new ideas, levels of distress, financial pain and conflict. This seemed to have less to do with the ability to be creative than it did with the congregation being nimble enough to enact the changes it wanted to make. I mention above that smaller congregations, overrepresented in this project, already are always having to make changes because their personnel and financial resources shift so frequently. It is not surprising that those congregations were able to recoup more quickly than larger congregations whose systems are more ingrained, less flexible, more expensive, and infrequently examined for utility.

Post the arrival of Covid19 the work in congregations was not innovation or creativity, because that happened on its own. What the congregations needed was the

path-clearing ability to respond to the situation at hand with the resources at hand: nimbleness.

Paul Light, author of the book *Sustaining Innovation*, writes that the goal is not the innovation itself but the ability to tolerate innovation – in other words, being nimble enough to be responsive to needs as they emerge. He notes that having external turbulence is a preferred state of organizational being. I return to a quote I used in the introduction above:

Permanent whitewater conditions are regularly taking us all out of our comfort zones and asking things of us that we never imagined would be required. Permanent white water means permanent life outside one's comfort zone. [The challenge is how to handle it.] Will [we] hunker down against the surf, holding on for dear life, or will [we] turn into it, harnessing the power it contains to take control of [our] own destiny? The trick is to apply shocks to the system in a way that keeps the organization alert but not terrified.<sup>14</sup>

We overshot that by a long way in 2020, but once the terror subsided, the innovation began. This is predictable given Light's comment.

Light runs through some myths to avoid and conditions to create in this quest for the organizational nimbleness that leads to innovation. First, the leadership needs to understand that innovation comes from everywhere, not from just a few. That means that keeping in close touch with 'the audience' is imperative to be effective. For this study, I interpret 'the audience' to mean both the congregation and congregation's context.

Innovation does not seek perfection but always to learn from mistakes. There needs to be permission to fail. "[I]f you've never done something before, how do you

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<sup>14</sup> Light, *Innovation*, 34.

know it's not a step you have to take to get to success?...Good judgement comes from experience. Experience comes from bad judgement.”<sup>15</sup>

Light says that it is important to keep both faith and intuition alive. Faith leads to greater power and permission for fallibility and forgiveness. With faith there is room for imagining a more hopeful future. It becomes clear that success depends on more than the individual.

Not for nothing, Light recommends that the leadership in a nimble and innovating community stay balanced. Leadership can be committed to mission and also have families, outside lives, and fun. Stay human, Light recommends. You do not need superheroes. “[The leaders of innovation] were not willing to sacrifice all.”<sup>16</sup> This echoes the work of Ms. Harper and her camp staff as quoted above. The leadership does not martyr themselves to the cause or the process but is able to reap the benefits of the labor as much as the recipients.

Constance Dierickx writes much about nimbleness in her book *High Stakes Leadership: Leading through Crisis with Courage, Judgment and Fortitude*.

I believe that today's most successful leaders are expert practitioners in something I call high-stakes leadership—the ability to lead effectively in times of whitewater change and great risk...In my experience, some leaders are able to deal with all this change and risk, and some are not.<sup>17</sup>

She may as well be describing 2020 when she goes on to say,

When we think about crisis, we generally think only about the negatives that crises tend to bring with them. A crisis is, after all, a disruption of the calm that

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<sup>15</sup> Light, *Innovation*, 149.

<sup>16</sup> Light, *Innovation*, 238.

<sup>17</sup> Dierickx, *Leadership*, xiii.



we may have enjoyed for some period of time. But one thing a crisis has over calm is that it is extremely clarifying.<sup>18</sup>

We need to encourage our congregations to commit to reevaluating their systems as they emerge from quarantine after these clarifying months. The temptation will be to return to the systems and processes that existed before, the ones that did not serve well even then, because they were comfortable. This needs to be avoided. Above, Ms. Harper speaks about the “chuck it out” ethos she wants to continue in her youth programming work. Dierickx affirms this inclination at some length:

Sometimes...you must abandon your work. I was struck by this because it isn't an easy thing to do. When we make an investment in a piece of art or a business, we can become very attached to it. The concept of sunk costs applies both to business and to art. The idea is that, once we have made an investment that feels significant to us, we have a hard time letting go. Yet, an artist may need to put a canvas aside to free up energy for another project. In business, we often hang on to unproductive plans, people, or entire businesses long after it is clear we should cut them loose. Why? Because the human urge is to preserve that in which we have invested. Sometimes the most expeditious act is to divest. Let go. Free up your mind, energy, money, and talent to pursue something else... Letting go of what doesn't work is like throwing useless baggage off an airplane in flight—it lightens the load and allows you to get where you want to go. Too much junk in the trunk can slow even a Ferrari. I have learned from working with successful people that they don't focus only on where they want to go and having the fuel to get there; they intentionally get rid of things that create drag. It is very common for leaders to tolerate drag of all sorts, failing to recognize the downside. Why? It can be harder to stop doing something than to add more to the list.<sup>19</sup>

Congregations will end up with more than a year's practice in letting their old ways go in pursuit of what is newly appropriate. It will be important that they get rid of drag in their congregational lives as they reemerge. The skills they have built during this

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<sup>18</sup> Dierickx, *Leadership*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Dierickx, *Leadership*, 12, 17.

time are inadvertently exactly what they need to do the critical work of reinventing and reorienting that was calling them before the pandemic struck.

Several of the interviewees reported that they knew the work they have now done was necessary well before Covid19 came to us. Soon the temptation will be to return to ‘normal’; I hope there grows an understanding that a nimble putting aside of old ways is the key to congregational effectiveness. Dierickx asks: “Is there weight in your organization that prevents dynamic action? As a leader, are you creating a culture of experimentation and learning?”<sup>20</sup> It is safe to say that this pandemic time has created the perfect environment for learning and for experimentation. The requirements of the old ways were entirely lifted. Experimentation was forced upon us all. It is critical that we understand the gift we have been given and continue that nimbleness and experimentation in our congregational lives, pandemic or not.

Our newly effective Unitarian Universalist congregation will center creativity, nimbleness and relevance to external contexts even and especially when those contexts are chaotic. It will start with mission – otherwise known as purpose or passion – and then move to creating a flexible approach to meeting that mission that encourages all people to participate. New structures will emerge to serve those missions and those contexts. “Whether expanding, downsizing, or ‘rightsizing’, energetic nonprofits employ a kind of stable instability, as they struggle to be sufficiently agile to decipher and deal with an open-ended future.”<sup>21</sup> As we emerge from quarantine, we should be able to transform the

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<sup>20</sup> Dierickx, *Leadership*, 76.

<sup>21</sup> George, G Worth. "Leadership jazz: Selected themes for orchestrating nonprofit quality." *Non-Profit World*, 1993: 28-32.

low-energy congregation of the past by remembering the joy and renewal that comes from connecting institutional operations with real needs and real abilities. “When motivation is discovered and engaged, it generates energy. And energy is something every organization could use more of.”<sup>22</sup>

While it might be surprising, a religious organization may be best positioned to model nimble innovation in action. There is indeed something about a highly functioning organization that relies on sacred principles. It is our calling as religious organizations that puts us in the best possible position to do good work. Paul Light points right to us when he concludes his book:

[O]rganizations cannot underestimate the importance of faith as a core value for sustaining innovativeness. There is simply no way to persevere in the face of the stress and uncertainty associated with true innovation without faith in something larger than oneself. Faith gives organizations the ability to forgive, endure and imagine...Whether rooted in formal religion...culture...a vision of a just society...or simple confidence in basic human capacity...faith provides the extra element that keeps an innovating organization vibrant even as it confronts the ordinary disappointments involved in challenging the prevailing wisdom for the public good.<sup>23</sup>

And Rev. Molly Baskette refers directly to this unique opportunity as the church returns from quarantine and metaphorically stands in the sunlight, blinking and looking around:

A few years ago I told a room full of pastors that we were entering a time of unprecedented disruption, and that disruption would in fact become our new equilibrium - the only thing we could, in fact, depend on.... [We are called to] a dynamic stability. How do we hold our center when everything around us is changing? How do we balance innovation and disruption without making ourselves and our communities feel crazy? A friend has embroidered the Beatitudes by adding, “Blessed are the flexible, for they will not get bent out of shape.” Dynamic stability is not rigid. It requires the ability to move fluidly from

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<sup>22</sup> Dierickx, *Leadership*, 139.

<sup>23</sup> Light, *Innovation*, 256.

a stable center. Think bike riding, dancing, or surfing, muscles requiring constant recalculation so the body can stay vertical. It takes serious effort and intention at first, but later becomes second nature, as body and mind work together to intuitively adjust to the outside forces acting upon it... Even something as simple as walking is really calculated falling. In this current stormy sea, as we learn to walk again, we can't do things the way we've always done them at church - and thank God for that. The relative quiescence of the church until now might have killed it altogether had not this storm arrived at our doors. It is remaking us, and faster than we ever imagined.<sup>24</sup>

In short, a faith-based organization, full of promise, needs to integrate a practice of nimbleness for its potential to come into being.

### **CREATING BELOVED COMMUNITY: AN ETHOS OF BELONGING**

Whether we choose to call it building beloved community, radical inclusion, an ethos of belonging, or a Welcome Table orientation, the third marker of an effective organization is that organization's ability to bring forth the full diversity of perspectives and viewpoints that exist within the organization so it has the fullest possible sense of what needs are present and what resources are available to meet them. The participants' ability to bring their whole selves to the project, and the project's willingness and ability to incorporate each person's unique talents, skills, perspectives and history, is what primes an organization to be particularly effective – in other words, creative, innovative, relevant, resourced.

This ethos of belonging or ethic of radical inclusion is a quality consistently missing from organizations. Secular organizations bemoan its lack as stunting creativity, innovation, and efficacy, and religious organizations are stunted in these same ways. Further, in religious institutions the lack of an ethos of belonging can be called a sin, a

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<sup>24</sup> Baskette, "Church on Fire," 63.

way in which human beings turn against the intentions of God for a vibrant and diverse world in which all of creation naturally belongs.

Why this ethos of belonging/beloved community matters can be approached from an organizational standpoint and from a faith-based one and this paper will look at both.

## CHAPTER THREE

### AN ETHOS OF BELONGING

#### **THEOLOGICAL GROUNDING**

Unitarian Universalism is a non-creedal faith that was formed as an increasingly expansive version of Christianity until we broke through the wall separating us from non-Christian neighbors and the Christian church excluded us from membership in the National Council of Churches in the mid-20th century.<sup>1</sup> Our theology is open; rather than focus on religious beliefs, we covenant to follow Seven Principles (Appendix A). We recognize that our people and our beliefs come from many sources and we have identified six of them for reference (Appendix B). These compilations form the Unitarian Universalist organizational covenants by which we identify ourselves as belonging to the faith.

Because of these diverse sources, it is appropriate and expected that Unitarian Universalists draw from a range of places for theological guidance and inspiration. In the tradition of my religion I would like to draw from several diverse sources of spiritual grounding for the work of this paper, in addition to the ones explored above: The First and Seventh Unitarian Universalist Principles; the Christian concept of the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12); the African American and later civil-rights-era spiritual “I’m

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<sup>1</sup> Unitarian Universalist Association. History of Unitarian Universalism. n.d. <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/who-we-are/history> (accessed March 6, 2020).

Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table”; and lessons learned from trees and forests. I will use these sources to explore the theology that undergirds the idea that each of us are unique and precious and that our contributions to the whole are imperative, so that working to ensure each person’s participation is holy and necessary work. Building Beloved Community is not just a pretty idea but a moral imperative, especially for Unitarian Universalists.

### UU Principles

The Unitarian Universalist First Principle, which affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and the Seventh Principle, which asks us to respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, underscore the importance of every person as part of a family of creation to which we, too, belong (Appendix A).

Inherent worth and dignity implies that every person matters regardless of what society - even our own UU social groupings - tell us about them. There are no people to throw away or ignore and no practice or even sin so great that a person’s worth is erased. Practically speaking, this principle informs Unitarian Universalists that even when we are enmeshed in long established cultural practices that exclude others, it is our task to dismantle those, since each person matters and can belong in our faith or the operation of our faith.

The Seventh Principle, respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part, takes the First Principle out of the abstract and into the personal. The reason why we affirm the inherent worth of others is because we all belong to each other. Denying another their value is ultimately the same as denying our own. And when we live in a world where some voices and experiences are silenced it is our own web and

reality that is affected, not an abstract Other. This concept is echoed in the lessons we can draw from forests, outlined below.

### The Body of Christ

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? (1 Corinthians 12: 12-30, NIV)

Since Christianity is a Unitarian Universalist Source (Appendix B), we can turn to it for wisdom. Since Unitarian Universalism is historically Christian, it can be suggested that the reason we have the Principles that we do is because of scripture passages such as 1 Corinthians 12. In it, Paul uses the metaphor of the human body to show God’s intent in creation: diversity. Paul tells us that God means for the human family to be as diverse as the parts of the human body who work together as a common entity. As this body, we



come with different purposes and different gifts. The body cannot do without each of us. It takes all the parts to make the whole. We need each other in visceral ways.

Furthermore, Paul makes the counter-cultural assertion that it is the weaker and less popular body parts that need the most affirmation and care. This is an equity argument. Paul says that God has already made those parts most honorable and it is our task to support God's truth in this way. There should be no division and no hierarchy. With this metaphor of the body, such hierarchy is ridiculous. Each of us need each one of us in order not only to thrive but even to survive.

Suffice it to say, human systems through time, and our American system at present, have created divisions and hierarchies that limit, silence, and destroy whole kinds of people. We are living in a world that functionally self-murders through the oppression of some of us and the greed of others of us. Using this metaphor of the Body of Christ helps us to reorient and recognize that our efforts to overcome divisions is not only nice but required by all that is holy. We can also call this work inclusion.

#### “We’re/I’m Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table”

This hymn was particularly popular during the 20th century civil rights era when protesters were putting their bodies in places forbidden by law and society, like Woolworth lunch counters.<sup>2</sup> The concept of God's welcome table stems from a much earlier reference to the marriage feast of the Lamb in the book of Revelation<sup>3</sup> but the way

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<sup>2</sup> Azizi Powell, I'm Gonna Sit at The Welcome Table (civil rights song). November 29, 2014. <http://civilrightssongs.blogspot.com/2014/11/im-gonna-sit-at-welcome-table-civil.html> (accessed March 6, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Griffith, I'm Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table. January 6, 2013. <http://www.stephengriffith.com/folksongindex/i%CA%BCm-gonna-sit-at-the-welcome-table/> (accessed March 6, 2020).

the song has evolved has led to lyrics that call for welcome and redemption in all sorts of settings. The common theme is that God has already set a table for every human being, a table of care, communion and abundance. Everyone already belongs. This song becomes a lament for the ways in which we are not currently welcome at the table and calls for a day for us to be returned to our rightful place.

In my training at Wesley Theological Seminary (United Methodist), Welcome Table imagery was frequently used in meditations and prayers to reinforce our understanding of our individual belonging and the intent of God to have every being at the table. We were encouraged to imagine an infinite table, laden with all the best food the world has to offer, as lovingly made as if our grandma was in the kitchen. Our seats were comfortable and prominent; our names were engraved on place holders; all we had to do was sit down. We were encouraged to look down and up this table and realize that every person belonged, every person was entitled to be fed, every person would be joining us. The worst thing we could do was block someone from their rightful place.

To this day this metaphor convinces me that God's intent for humanity is for everyone to feast together on God's bounty, excluding no one, creating no hierarchy. How do we make sure we have a world where everyone is fed what they are entitled to? How do we help each person to their place at the table? There are a million ways in which we can help this vision come true.

### The Hidden Life of Trees

Our Sixth Source, which instructs us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature, encourages us to look to the practices of the planet to inform us of God's wider

plan for us. Peter Wohlleben's book *The Hidden Life of Trees*<sup>4</sup> describes the intensely social network that forests employ to communicate with and care for its individual trees. What looks to many humans as a stand of individual trees each surviving alone is an intricate network both above and below ground that helps the collective survive and thrive over time. This network exists for trees that are similar in species and those who are different; it exists for every tree in the forest regardless of size, type or age.

If human beings in communities were encouraged to think less of themselves as individual members required to survive on their own or merely in family or otherwise like groupings, and more about themselves as a collective that both gives and receives care and communication as one body, we would be better equipped for living in dangerous times. Further, I would argue that this situation is not a matter of choosing: we already exist in this interconnected way. Whether we choose to see it or not or internalize it or not is more to the point. We already need and depend on one another for survival.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL GROUNDING**

Consider this as a secular, organizational version of the 1 Corinthians passage above:

[C]ollaborative work depends on a group or community acting in a coordinated fashion. The members need not all be doing the same thing; it is enough that each one does whatever particular thing he is doing for a common purpose. For example, although in theory it may be possible for a lone individual to construct an aircraft capable of flying several hundred people with their luggage across continents, in practice it is not feasible. Due to practical limitations of time, financial resources, specialized talent, and so forth, therefore, people interested in constructing such a plane should gather round and constitute a business firm or corporation. They ought to pool together their efforts and resources because their objective cannot be reached except through a common productive effort.

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries from A Secret World*. Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2013.

Collaborative work then becomes the reason for being, the end or purpose of the firm, what brings together all the people and resources in the same production process.

Note that the common good of the firm does not refer primarily to things in themselves, to the goods and services produced, but to the collaborative work entailed by their production. This collaborative work, even more than the external results or output, is the main reason people come together in the firm.<sup>5</sup>

What are the organizational reasons for wanting participants or employees to be free to bring their whole selves to the collective? What are the religious reasons for wanting that same thing? In organizations that are religious, the answer may be the same: the pursuit of maximum creative potential of both the individuals and the group towards the greater good.

From both an organizational standpoint and from a religious one, pursuit of individual wholeness is important. “[S]tudies show that groups tend to innovate faster, see mistakes more quickly and find better solutions to problems. Studies also show that people working in teams tend to achieve better results and report higher job satisfaction.”<sup>6</sup> Groups that undercut individual open participation, creativity, and wholeness, lead to poorer organizational performance<sup>7</sup>. Why is that? Because each individual participant brings a diverse perspective, a unique outlook, that solves problems and thinks of solutions in a way no other member can. No-one can build the plane alone; a body made of only hands or only feet would not be a body at all. There is no such thing

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<sup>5</sup> Alejo Jose’ G. Sison and Joan Fontrodona, "Participating in the Common Good of the Firm." *Journal of Business Ethics*, 2013, 612.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Duhigg, "What Google Learned from its Quest to Build the Perfect Team." *New York Times*. February 28, 2016. [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/what-google-learned-from-its-quest-to-build-the-perfect-team.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/what-google-learned-from-its-quest-to-build-the-perfect-team.html?_r=0).

<sup>7</sup> Denhardt, *Managing Human Behavior*. Dierickx, *Leadership*. Duhigg, "Google." *Light, Innovation*.

as an individual tree in the forest. Without the input of each member of a team, the team's potential is compromised; the work is more difficult.

When Google studied its teams with an eye to team qualities that led to an increase in productivity,

they noticed ... behaviors that all the good teams generally shared. First, on the good teams, members spoke in roughly the same proportion, a phenomenon the researchers referred to as 'equality in distribution of conversational turn-taking.'

'As long as everyone got a chance to talk, the team did well,' [the researchers] said. 'But if only one person or a small group spoke all the time, the collective intelligence declined.'<sup>8</sup>

The reason for this is that when people feel psychologically safe enough to take their share in conversation, then the gifts and perspectives that they uniquely bring are brought into the team for the benefit of all.

In congregations we see further holy and ethical benefits of such an orientation. The need for holy 'productivity' is no less in a congregation than it is in any other body; in fact, one could argue that it is in our congregations where we are able to make a real difference in people's lives. Without external motivators like career or financial motivations, the volunteer organization of the church calls out for effective collective action in the direction of the greater good. You could even call this work 'public theology'. How do a group of equals motivate each other in an identified direction?

Constance Dierickx says you do not need to create motivation if you can uncover it through a commitment to relationship and discovery of individual talents.

You must know the people working with you—really know them—if you are going to be able to detect what motivates them, and what shuts them down... [what this involves] is observation and conversation. What do they do well? What do they seem to enjoy doing? What aspect of the work elicits enthusiastic

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<sup>8</sup> Duhigg, "Google."

behavior when they talk about it? Those things are a good start...When motivation is discovered and engaged, it generates energy. And energy is something every organization could use more of.<sup>9</sup>

Max DePree likens this organizational dance to playing jazz music.

We improvise, but always as an ensemble, not a chance collection of musicians. We shared the lead, passing it off easily from one to the other. We experimented with ways to express our creativity. [We] understood our strengths and helped compensate for deficiencies as we got better at ‘doing our own thing...Uncovering what people really feel but believe they can’t talk about is the smartest move a leader can make.<sup>10</sup>

This attention to individual wholeness and participation is not just an organizational trick, it is holy work. The operations of churches and other religious organizations allow us the opportunity to bring the Body of Christ into life, allow us to set the Welcome Table for every participant, encourages every one of us to know that we belong. It allows us to build Beloved Community. This is not just effective, it is a moral imperative, an action that brings the Kingdom of God closer to earth. It is rewarding.

DePree again:

Astute leaders place an exceptional premium on collaboration and cooperation...drawing out the inherent strengths of teammates and helping them gain satisfaction from achieving shared organizational goals...A candle loses nothing by lighting another. The room just gets brighter.<sup>11</sup>

It is the brightness of living that religious organizations are called to seek and spread.

## **DISMANTLING SYSTEMS OF OPPRESSION**

When inviting diverse co-creators, you need...to build trust, authenticity, diversity, inclusion, equality, and equity...Acknowledge, understand, and utilize

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<sup>9</sup> Dierickx, *Leadership*.

<sup>10</sup> George, “Leadership Jazz.”

<sup>11</sup> George, “Leadership Jazz.”

the strengths and the nature of the expertise each stakeholder brings, but don't confine their roles and input to these areas. Understand the barriers of sharing power and/or access that prevents diverse co-creators from coming and working together. Address those barriers and include their voices. It takes work and it is hard, but the output will be stronger.<sup>12</sup>

It would be a mistake to assume that American organizational leaders can simply wave a magic wand to equalize participants and their contributions in a country so soaked in social inequality. The inequities of the general culture are at least equally present in our religious organizations if not magnified.

Victor Ray writes in the Harvard Business Review:

In reality (and even though we typically do not say this out loud), many mainstream American organizations have profited from and reinforced white dominance. Many still do. Understanding this context is vital to seeing organizations for what they really are: not meritocracies, but long-standing social structures built and managed to prioritize whiteness. Only then can leaders begin thinking differently about race — not as a temporary problem to solve or a box to check, but as a fundamental part of what it means to be a company in America.<sup>13</sup>

Religious organizations like Unitarian Universalism can make a commitment to dismantling systems of oppression as a justice issue or a moral issue, but this paper makes the case that the dismantling of those systems makes organizations effective at their chosen missions, because when people cannot bring their whole selves to a chosen project, the ability to complete that project excellently is reduced.

Majority-white organizations sometimes make some effort towards increasing diversity in their workforce without understanding the depth of the problem they are trying to correct, to which they are largely blind. Ray reminds us:

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<sup>12</sup> Creative Reaction Lab. Equity Centered Community Design Field Guide. Field Guide, St Louis: A Creative Reaction Lab Publication, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Ray, Victor. "Why So Many Organizations Stay White." Harvard Business Review. November 19, 2019. <https://hbr.org/2019/11/why-so-many-organizations-stay-white>

Segregation is not natural. Rather, segregated outcomes result from explicit policy — or, more charitably, implicit bias. These processes are especially dangerous when we believe that an organization has nothing to do with race...It is safer, and likely more realistic, to start with the assumption that organizations are contributing to racial inequality unless the data shows otherwise.<sup>14</sup>

If a religious organization is contributing to racial inequality rather than allowing each person the chance to flourish and contribute, what actions need to be taken?

Multiple researchers take a policy-change approach to antiracism work, saying that since racism and racial inequity was intentionally constructed, it is only an intentional deconstruction that will bring it to an end<sup>15</sup>. To fulfill the promise outlined above by encouraging maximum individual contribution to a project within a diverse environment, they say it is imperative that we include this anti-oppression work as part of our organizational strategy.

Both the Creative Reaction Lab and Ibram Kendi offer clear step by step processes for dismantling oppressive structures – which is not to be confused with easy work. The Creative Reaction Lab is interested in seeking equity in project design of all types. They recommend practices to foster that sort of equity, and their Field Guide adds tips and how-tos to make the effort more successful. Their overall approach includes a mix of these tasks, which are not to be taken linearly:

- Invite Diverse Co Creators
- Build Humility and Empathy
- Focus on History and Healing

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<sup>14</sup> Ray, “Organizations.”

<sup>15</sup> Creative Reaction Lab, “Field Guide.” Ray, “Organizations.”



- Acknowledge and Dismantle Power Constructs
- Define and Assess the Community Needs
- Ideate Approaches
- Prototype, Test and Learn.

This approach allows diverse stakeholders to add their voices to a common cause, without ignoring either systemic barriers to equity or a past where such barriers had negative impact. Within this mix, the project or community can create plans for action. A congregation would do well to be created and operated under this model.<sup>16</sup>

Ibram Kendi's model of dismantling racist structures may also prove helpful for both organizations and congregations hoping to eliminate oppressive policy. His model outlines these actions:

- Admit that racial inequity is a problem of bad policy, not bad people.
- Identify racial inequity
- Uncover the racist policies causing it
- Invent or find antiracist policy to eliminate racial inequality
- When policies fail, do not blame the people. Start over and seek out new

and more effective antiracist treatments until they work

- Monitor closely to prevent new racist policies from being instituted<sup>17</sup>

Since most congregations are extant organizations created within an inequitable structure, this system of review and repair might prove helpful. The combination of strong focus on the anti-oppressive structural work while taking the focus off any

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<sup>16</sup> Creative Reaction Lab, "Field Guide."

<sup>17</sup> Kendi, *Antiracist*, 231-232

individual racist actors may help organizations and congregations keep at the effort and avoid typical fatigue, shame and confusion in the dominant culture which adds to the resistance.

### **THE INTERVIEWEES AND THE ETHOS OF BELONGING**

In the interviews with the congregations and organizations there were several examples of encouraging the participation of everyone's whole selves or bringing new voices to the table. At the same time, the emergency nature of the Covid19 response also could lead to a constricting of leading voices to meet the challenges.

The clearest example of the energy and creativity that comes from expanding the leadership pool can be seen in the middle school camp planning. Since no known 'formula' was going to apply to the new situation, Ms. Harper was forced to go back to the drawing board, and chose to include stakeholders, most notably youth, in that process. The results were successful because they were so highly responsive to the needs of the current time and the people participating. Ms. Harper's plan to base future programming on a series of questions to ask rather than a set formula or recipe is one way to keep those future programs very closely linked to both the constituents and the environment that is presenting itself at the time of the program. We see echoes of the recommendations from the Creative Design Lab in this plan. Congregations would do well to get into this flexible an orientation.

At the UU Fellowship of Plattsburgh we see the richness and creativity generated by adding more people to the decision making and leadership pool. Their decision that in worship 'the people would be the message' and that they would plan their worship just days before to be as responsive to those people and their experiences as possible led to

services that were maximally relevant to the real lives of the participants. In a way, this process mirrors the middle school camp, where everything was so new that the leaders threw out the old model and invented a new one using their membership as the stakeholder base informing their path. Furthermore, Plattsburgh's encouraging of multiple leaders to demonstrate spiritual practices in worship led to a much wider embrace of those practices and a much higher comfort level with them as a concept; acceptance and use of these practices surely had impact on the spiritual and mental health of the congregants as they weathered this stressful time. And Plattsburgh's decision to expand their strategic planning process to include any interested congregant in their Think Tanks led to a wider range of ideas and resources to be considered. These three innovations will lead to higher creativity and efficacy in the days ahead.

In the early days the emergency of the global pandemic frequently restricted leadership to paid staff and the most prominent lay leaders in ways that are only now being reconsidered. Although First UU Indiana spoke of it the most, most of the interviewees responded to the early days of the pandemic by stepping into strong and often solo leadership. Paid staff in particular worked overtime, taking the load from the stunned and disoriented volunteer pool. Although this was a reasonable response to a crisis, to be most effective the congregations will want to not only backtrack from this sort of solo decision making but go further into finding new ways to get more voices heard and involved in their future processes.

The continuous work of dismantling systems of oppression in our organizations during Covid19 was brought up infrequently in the interviews. This is not surprising in light of Ray's statement that organizations unconsciously formed with systemic bias at its

core – i.e., nearly all American organizations – would need intentional work to remove that bias. This intentional work was not often front of mind during the pandemic crisis, exacerbated by the fact that the majority of our leaders identify as white.

When anti oppression work had already been intentionally instituted, however, it was able to continue into the crisis. Plattsburgh had already committed to dismantling white supremacy culture in their church systems and in the world and continued that work during the pandemic, expanding into a robust justice-based election effort as well. Borderlands UU was able to leverage the collective of the Baja 4 to convince their members to complete a national anti-racism class, even as their local partnerships with those working with border crossers was paused. And the Potomac Partnership is actively encouraging each of their congregations to adopt the 8th Principle<sup>18</sup>, an anti-racist policy adaptation. Here we can see both the enduring power of intentional antiracist work even in crisis as well as the power of a larger committed collective in keeping organizations accountable and on task.

## **AN ETHOS OF BELONGING IN THE ORGANIZATION CALLED RELIGIOUS**

Creating an ethos of belonging, an ethic of inclusion, makes an organization effective. It is also what God calls human beings to do, a project that extends across time and space to every human being in every social grouping in every era. When we combine these two orientations into the religious organization, we see a great potential for good. In

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<sup>18</sup> The 8th Principle project, the brainchild of Paula Cole Jones, encourages congregations and the UUA to add an 8th Principle to our current seven: “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.” Learn more at <https://www.8thprincipleuu.org/>

fact, we touch on the very definition of public theology, enacting our religious values in the public square as both a location and a model. Our effective religious institutions are Beloved Communities, occasions of public theology, occasions for the holy hope for justice and peace to be created and recreated in a world that struggles with both. If we want our religious institutions to make the world better, we need to deploy these organizational strategies as an enactment of the public good.

A commitment to and examples of Beloved Community are needed by our planet like never before. The way we treat each other inside our communities matters. Those ways lead right out the doors into the public square for everyone to see. Congregations hamstring themselves with all-too-human flawed interactions that ignore both God's call for our wholeness and organizational strategies for effectiveness.

Robert Wright writes this about church organization in the post pandemic time:

This thought haunts me: If the emotional and spiritual maturity [of the church] will only rise to the level of the people who most often have the microphone, how far will we be able to grow? We treasure our systems of governance; but often the people who most effectively exercise quiet leadership - the leadership of example, the non-positional leadership of informal authority decentered from formal structures - get effectively silenced. Those folks...those are the voices we need right now; those are the people whose thinking has not been conditioned by the structures we've created that are now focused primarily on keeping themselves intact.<sup>19</sup>

We went into the pandemic asking what we needed to do to revive our congregations. This pandemic has provided an enormous gift, knocking us from habits and ruts that have not served us into a place where possibilities are wide. It is the

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Wright, "Authority is Exerted; Leadership is Exercised." In *We Shall be Changed: Questions for the Post Pandemic Church*, by Mark D. W., ed. (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2020,) 83.

organizational and leadership choices that our congregations make now that will tell us if we have found a new and vital path. Wright frames it this way:

The leaders we need now are those who reframe the problem and increase energy by crafting and posing catalytic questions...the listeners become engaged in the work of imagining their own answers, guided by the imagery of the beautiful question....[T]he exercise of leadership as invitation, leadership as artful questioning, leadership of wider and wider inclusion, leadership as willingness to put mission before institution- that will draw us out of the incarceration of our assumptions and into new imagining and possibility.”<sup>20</sup>

Will we be able to walk into this new future of imagination and possibility? Will the never-ending practicing of Beloved Community that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. named long ago come closer to reality? What will change in the world if we can do this? These are the questions facing the church universal as we emerge from the Covid19 pandemic and onto our next challenges.

### **NOT TO BE FORGOTTEN: TRUST AND RELATIONSHIP AT THE CORE**

I had not previously considered the role of the high levels of trust that I saw evidenced in every interview and every successful partnership that was described by the interviewees.

In Borderlands UU, Northeast Wisconsin, First UU Indiana and the Potomac Partnership, existing trusting relationships made the abrupt transition to functioning under quarantine smooth and obvious. In the interviews I conducted with mixed groups of lay leaders and ordained clergy, everyone was relaxed and shared the conversational space equitably, even when the clergy had more information and had done more of the work. In fact, more than once someone who stated they had not participated in very much

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<sup>20</sup> Wright, “Authority,” 84, 86.

or led anything at all had been invited to the interview and were encouraged to share their opinions at the same rate as everyone else<sup>21</sup>. The three clergy of the Potomac Partnership stated the importance of trust and relationship very clearly: “[T]he existence of the Potomac Partnership is contingent upon a deep and trusting relationship between the three of us to start...this wouldn’t happen without that.”

My research also points to the importance of trust and relationship building in building an effective organization. Paul Light writes:

Trust is the logical place to begin. ...one of the defining issues in building an innovating organization is what it believes about people. Does the organization believe that creativity and high performance are concentrated in the special few or more evenly distributed throughout the organization?<sup>22</sup>

Trust is a key component to deep relationship. It is relationship that is most critical in effective organizational work and, I would argue, at the foundation of a congregation’s ability to be a force for good in the world. Above I referenced the importance of tolerating conflict in healthy congregations that Martin Luther King described, of being able to be present to different opinions and perspectives, coming in and out of a dance where divergent views are managed and commonalities then found.

Constance Dierickx adds:

Relationships are what allow us to learn together, form partnerships, be forgiven when we make mistakes, and hear criticism. A relationship that is strong tolerates disagreement. It is the weak ones that break in conflict rather than bend to allow resolution. An organization where relationships are weak and ideas quashed is brittle and far more likely to end up in a crisis than one where people can tell you there is smoke before the fire engulfs it. When relationships are strong, people are

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<sup>21</sup> This happened in my interviews with the NE Wisconsin Group and with First UU Indiana.

<sup>22</sup> Light, *Innovation*, 248.

more willing to “take the hill” together, whether the hill is literal or metaphorical.<sup>23</sup>

If public theology is defined by the ways in which a congregation displays and enacts its core values in the world, then there is an important point to be made here about nurturing relationships of trust and honesty in doing that. That relationship of trust can clear a path for enacting the organization’s mission. The Potomac Partnership points to this as well:

[T]ypically ministers have egos that do not allow for them to do this kind of work, because they are threatened by a myriad of things that will cause them that anxiety: will they like them more than me? Will she be a better preacher than I am - whatever the case may be. In part because of the relationship that we have built over the years – we’ve been building these relationships intentionally... But the ministers have to overcome their egos in order for this to be successful, and as much as I tease them, I’m so thrilled to have [their voices] in the room, because the only thing that’s going to do is to add to the depth and wholeness of my congregation. Why wouldn’t I want that, if I’m mission driven?

Note also however that Light writes that trust is not without limits. He does not think an organization should make the same mistake twice – in other words, avoid being gullible or foolish. Trust and honesty go hand in hand. He insists that an organization never give false permission to fail, but to his mind real permission to experiment and learn as much from the failures as successes is the core of an innovating, effective community.

Light believes an organization does well with core values of honesty, rigor, trust and faith, not just because one result is harmonious interactions, but because those values lead to effective pursuit of its mission: “When an innovating organization asks hard questions about why it exists, whom it serves, and how it will know if it is successful, it

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<sup>23</sup> Dierickx, *Leadership*, 93.



must be willing to give honest answers.”<sup>24</sup> This commitment to the hard question and the honest answer can be seen throughout my interviews. The congregations turned away from habits that did not serve the time and experimented with practices that did, all under the umbrella of trusting relationships that allow for each person’s abilities to be used as a resource for the common good.

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<sup>24</sup> Light, *Innovation*, 248.

## CONCLUSION

### BELOVED COMMUNITY AND THE PUBLIC THEOLOGY OF UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM

We will come out of the Covid19 pandemic a changed society and a changed church. We do not yet know what the community's needs will be. Perhaps the best way we can prepare for the future is to nurture our ability to be locations and models of Beloved Community – which is another way of saying that we will have internalized the ethos of belonging such that no-one is excluded from our circles of care. Such a practice of Beloved Community is counter-cultural, a way of bringing our UU value of inclusion into the broader culture which seems to exclude people at a quickening clip.

Despite rhetoric about this nation being a land of opportunity and resources, “[a]ctually, America is a heterogeneous and divided society. It is composed of distinct ethnic groups that tend to see each other as competitors, and such pluralistic societies do not tend to support their citizens.” Our tolerance for inequality, our heterogeneous nature and our competitive spirit lead directly to a weak public welfare system, which endangers the vulnerable. “This creates a vacuum: services are needed but are not publicly provided. The most common organization that steps into this vacuum is religious.”<sup>1</sup> Cnaan et al are referring to social services like food kitchens or child/elder care that have historically been more robustly provided by the church than by an American welfare state. I would argue that our heterogeneous, divided, warring culture also needs the healing that an intentional effort at creating Beloved Community can bring.

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<sup>1</sup> Ram A. Cnaan, Stephanie C. Boddie, and Gaynor I. Yancey. "Bowling Alone But Serving Together: The Congregational Norm of Community Involvement." In *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good*, by Corwin Smidt, ed. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2003,) 28-29.

Where else do we see efforts made to include the excluded and heal the wounds that our dominant cultures have inflicted on generations of people they decided were not worthy? That history of repeated abuse, trauma and mistrust has led to our present reality of kneejerk exclusion, suspicion and continued unexamined harm. We do not have a location to heal from these wounds. We do not have a common language to learn about trust building or how we need each other to survive. Who will teach us to build the Beloved Community in this fractured nation if not our religions? Who will remind us that love, communion and change are the center of reality and we do not need to live lives of injury, trauma, war and death? Who will show us how to reorient?

It appears that our nation needs religion. I would argue that our religion also needs America. The context of social inequity, rapid change, and social instability gives my religion the reason for being that it needs to revitalize and thrive. Our broken American system offers both a mission and a pathway to enact it.

In a perfect world, perhaps we do not need religion in the public square. When heaven comes to earth, then the church can easily return to being locations for sharing meaning and values and communing inside its own walls – although my definition of heaven-on-earth entails no walls at all. Before that time, however, this country needs us in the common square as locations and models of Beloved Community: to identify inequity, to frame the discourse for change, to be free and equipped to imagine solutions, and to joyfully experiment with those solutions as a model for all. This entry into the public square will be a rewarding change from a church structure where the most important task of the day is to fill a Board of Trustee slot or pave the parking lot. Regardless of what happens in the coming years, the work is before us, and we have the

tools we need to complete it: theological grounding, organizational wisdom, and a moral imperative to bring our values to the public square in this way.

Paul Light offers us a final thought on organizational innovation. He asks what kind of innovation we want to have, saying there is *how* innovation and *what* innovation. Our religious institutions' sought-after innovation may not be different from that longed for through millennia: What we want is a world of justice and peace. But *how* we enact this innovation may be the key to our efficacy, to the public theology that we offer. In doing this work of recovering ourselves post-pandemic with a focus on mission, fostering nimbleness, and practicing an ethos of belonging, we can find purpose and joy inside and outside the church and the world can be healed. What better alignment of mission and times could we hope for than the need and longing to work on Beloved Community together? The table is set; all we must do is get to work.

## APPENDIX A

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association,  
covenant to affirm and promote:

1st Principle: The inherent worth and dignity of every person;

2nd Principle: Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

3rd Principle: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth  
in our congregations;

4th Principle: A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;

5th Principle: The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process  
within our congregations and in society at large;

6th Principle: The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for  
all;

7th Principle: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are  
a part.

## APPENDIX B

The living tradition we share draws from many sources:

1. Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
2. Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
3. Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
4. Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
5. Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
6. Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

## APPENDIX C

### Interview Protocol:

Interviews were conducted in December 2020 and January 2021 over Zoom video conference. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was recorded and transcribed. I encouraged each organization to invite whichever participants were germane to the changes they had enacted. See below for attendees and roles.

I was hoping to stimulate a wide-ranging conversation that generated a lot of information about what each organization had done, but I sent this list in advance to inform the conversation, and did come back to the first tier of questions when the conversation needed a boost. The second set of questions were generated from discussions with my Doctor of Ministry cohort and my workplace Conversation Partners and while not always relevant, I did occasionally dip into that list when it seemed germane to the situation being discussed.

### Questions:

- What changes did you make to your congregation's structure and/or functioning as a result of the pandemic?
- Which of these changes do you anticipate keeping when the pandemic is over? Why?
- In my research, I've identified the markers of an effective congregation/community to be focus on mission, nimbleness, and radical inclusivity that suggests significant anti oppression work. Which of these traits are demonstrated in your experiments?

- Is there anything else you'd like to share that seems related to long term changes made during covid time?

If appropriate:

- Are you talking about the purpose of your community? How have the changes you've made related to that purpose?
- What have you learned about what matters most to your community?
- How would you define the center of your community?
- How do you know when you're doing your church "right"? What new ways have you found to do your church "right"? Do you have a story about doing your church "wrong" that caused you to learn something?
- How would you like your church to function when you're able to gather in person again? In a perfect world, how would the church be run?

The interview participants were:

Borderlands Unitarian Universalist, Amado, AZ. Interviewed January 19, 2021

- Rev. Matthew Funke Crary, Minister
- Martha House, Vice President
- Hugh Rhine, President
- Rylee Uhrich, Ministerial Intern

<http://www.borderlandsuu.org/>

Community Creek Middle School Camp, Online in the UUA's Central East Region.

Interviewed December 16, 2020



- Shannon Harper, Central East Region Youth and Emerging Adult Ministries Specialist

<https://www.uua.org/central-east/youth>

First Unitarian Universalist Church of Indiana, PA. Interviewed December 18, 2020

- Rev. Elizabeth Mount, Interim Minister
- Penelope Vick, Director of Religious Education
- Ruth Thomas, President

<http://www.firstuu-indianapa.org/>

Northeast Wisconsin Group, northeast WI. Interviewed January 4, 2021

- Rev. Jim Coakley, Minister
- Natalie Buhl, President - Green Bay Area Fellowship, Green Bay, WI
- Paula Christensen, President - UU Fellowship of Door County, Ephriam, WI
- Katina Daanen, Service Planning Leader - Green Bay Area Fellowship, WI
- Lois Lawler, President - The Point Fellowship, Stevens Point, WI
- Audrey Linn, Service Planning Leader - Open Circle Fellowship
- Marge Whitenger, President - Open Circle Fellowship, Fond du Lac, WI

Potomac Partnership, Greater Washington DC, Interviewed January 9, 2021

- Rev. Abhi Janamanchi, Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church, Bethesda, MD

- Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd, River Road Unitarian Universalist Congregation, Bethesda, MD
- Rev. David A. Miller, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Fairfax, Oakton, VA

<https://uucf.org/potomac-partnership/>

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Plattsburg, NY. Interviewed January 5th, 2021

- Rev. Nicoline Guerrier, Minister
- Nancy Lewin, Board Member, Treasurer
- Jo Ellen Miano, Music Director, Council on Shared Ministry
- Connie Shemo, co-President
- Rachelle Armstrong, co-President

<http://uuplattsburgh.org/>

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