

***Theologically Diverse – Radically Inclusive – Justice Centered***

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix

Sunday, April 15, 2018

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*The Vision of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix: To be a spiritual community for our time: Theologically Diverse, Radically Inclusive, Justice Centered.* This congregation adopted its vision for the future in June 2016, nearly two years ago now. In that action, you created and adopted a compelling vision of possibility, providing the foundation and guidance for everything we do here together.

It is a broad and challenging vision that will not be achieved easily; a vision that implies a new way of living in community; a vision that calls us to bring about a world we have never seen, a world that we together might create, a world that lives into the principles upon which our Unitarian Universalist faith is founded – human worth and dignity, justice equity and compassion, a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. In the 2016 annual congregational meeting when you voted to adopt this vision, the question was asked, “How long will this vision last?” And the response was, “The Vision will stay in effect as long as the Congregation wants.” A question was also asked about whether there should be a hyphen, but I have no idea where a hyphen might go in this statement, so that remains a small mystery to me.

You might reasonably ask a deeper question, “What difference will a Vision make?” Here in the UU Congregation of Phoenix, this Vision is already making a difference – a difference in how we plan and where we choose to focus our energy and resources. The Vision provides the framework within which newcomers learn what it means to be a member here, as well as focusing our Strategic Ends, the long-term goals for all our programs and priorities beginning this summer.

Those Strategic Ends were defined by your Board of Trustees last fall, based on the Vision, and they have been posted on the cabinet doors in the Johnson Room since that time. The Ends represent our best understanding of what this congregation might be and become as the Vision comes fully into reality. I want to talk this morning about each of those Strategic Ends, how they are grounded in your history and identity, what they might mean to each of us and all of us, and how they provide a way for us to begin living into the vision. But first, let me take a small side trip into a reality of congregational life – and what it will take to bring that Vision and those Strategic Ends into reality.

I got a pretty good dressing-down from one of our long-time members this week, expressing considerable anxiety that we were running a “stealth” campaign to fund the annual budget this year. What I heard from that member was their concern that: I had not even announced the financial goal for the campaign! I have not provided updates on how the pledges were coming in! I have not created a sense of urgency for people to complete their pledge forms and turn them in!! What was I thinking? Was I simply irresponsible?

So, okay, I will admit, I am not hounding you all about money from the pulpit every week. I hope I am not being mysterious or irresponsible. We are focusing this year on the vision and the possibility; the love, the commitment and the connections we share – my philosophy is that if we have the love, if people understand the vital nature of our mission in the world, and since you know that everything we do here is supported primarily by your pledges of financial support, then the money will follow, the support we need to live into the promise here will be pledged.

We have mobilized nearly 40 Connectors, members – your friends and neighbors - who are reaching out to have personal conversations with as many people as they can this month -- and I sincerely hope that when you receive their email or phone call, you will be open to a conversation with them. They are not going to hound you about money either. They want to talk with you about your connections here, about the love, about how you see us living into the promise that is emerging here at UUCP.

And since we do not have enough Connectors to reach out to everyone, others should have received a letter, with a brochure and golden pledge form in the mail. You can bring it in, mail it back, put it in the box in the Johnson Room – all we ask is that you complete it and get it back to us by the end of this month. And please volunteer to be a Connector next year so we can reach out to even more people for those great conversations! It is just four conversations for each Connector; it isn't much to ask, really. It is a lovely thing to be in conversation with each other.

And just so you know I am not keeping any secrets from you, if you have seen the brochure, you will know that the conservative goal to fund the basic operating budget for next year is a modest 5 percent increase over this year, for a total pledge goal of \$600,000. I know that sounds like a lot of money, but it is not much more than we are operating on this year, which you are already supporting – and if everyone chips in what they reasonably can to invest in what you believe, to support the power and promise you see here, we can continue to reach out to the world, to pay staff fairly, to expand the programs and activities that are so wonderful for children, teens and adults. We can continue to offer special events as we have this year – singing and dancing and dining and crafting. We can mobilize to show up for justice, and of course, we can pay the bills that keep the doors open.

When you pledge, you are being a responsible owner of this institution, an activist and a promise-keeper, bringing the healing and transformative presence of this congregation into the world. Your support keeps this amazing congregation living into the vision, keeping the promise alive, engaging the possibility that continues to unfold here. That is the way we will continue our vital work to transform culture and society, affirming human worth and dignity, justice, equity and compassion.

As of yesterday, we have 61 pledges turned in, with a grand total of \$167,000, so we are a bit over a quarter of our way to the goal – but that also tells me that lots of people have not yet returned their forms. I am increasing my own pledge by 20 percent for next year because I believe in you, I believe in what we do together here, and I invite you to sustain or increase your support if you can, in this important year of transition and ministerial search.

OK – back to the Vision and Strategic Ends, which of course are the promise we fulfill with our investment here. These Ends are the ambitious, audacious goals that will lead us into the emerging promise for the future of this congregation, creating the new reality that we wish to see in Phoenix, in Arizona, in this nation and this world. Why do I say these goals are ambitious and audacious? Because this Vision and these Ends are counter-cultural, perhaps even counter-biological. They call us to live beyond our comfort zone, beyond dichotomy, beyond our ancient tribal instinct to flock together with birds of the same feather, to be with people who are the same as we are. This vision calls us into the joy and discomfort of loving disagreement, of difference, of centering ourselves on justice and the wellbeing of the world rather than our own satisfaction. This is not an easy promise into which we live – in fact, I think this may be a 20-year vision, or a 50-year vision, though your particular ends might change -- and it is a vision so consistent with our Unitarian Universalist principles that I suspect it can guide you for a long time. Whether or not it has a hyphen.

The opening line of the vision is “To be a spiritual community for our time” and the three points that follow serve to define what it means to be that kind of spiritual community, a religion that fits our time, that follows and leads for this time in which we live – diverse, inclusive, justice centered.

We begin with Theological Diversity, and as I reviewed your notes on the history wall from the past three weeks, is it clear that an open weave of theological perspective has long been a high value for this congregation. The term *free* appears often in those notes that tell about your connection here – freedom of thought, free flow of ideas, free to explore ideas, room to learn and grow, open-minded ... and a celebration of the ways in which we are not all like-minded.

When we use the term *theology* – as when we say we aspire to be theologically diverse – we are not talking about theism, or a belief in any particular form of divinity. The Greek term *theos* in the word *theology* derives from an ancient proto-Indo-European root word meaning “bright sky” -- that which is beyond us, beyond our knowing -- not the more personified image we currently think of as “god.” Most liberal theologians interpret *theos* to refer to that which is ultimate or divine – it might be a god or gods, or the spark of life, or nature; the great mystery or the connective spirit of love. We are a religious tradition with a theology that is intentionally open, inquiring, searching, exploring, and to be a UU means being comfortable with that ambiguity.

The Strategic End, the goal in our work toward theological diversity is: “Rooted in deep understanding of various faiths and traditions, our congregation nurtures personal growth and the search for truth and meaning.” When your Board of Trustees asked for your input into how we achieve that end (and those comments are still posted in the Johnson Room), several of you suggested we create more experiences of sharing our individual and collective beliefs about the ultimate nature of things. Some hoped for opportunities to learn about different belief systems, about the practices that are part of those systems, and for workshops to help people explore and define their own beliefs.

A few comments expressed concern and discomfort about using religious terms, while others encouraged us to be open and respectful of each other’s terminology and beliefs even when we do not share them. In all those comments we can hear the diversity that thrives here, the desire for a safe place to be uncertain and to explore, along with that edge of discomfort we may feel when we are confronted with language that reminds us of our experience in less tolerant religious systems. What I love about your comments is the diversity they reflect, and the way they actually become a sort of conversation, a great place from which to explore how we can actually achieve true theological diversity, so uncommon in the world today.

The second Vision component is being Radically Inclusive – and again, your notes on the history wall speak to the importance of that value in community life here. Your words often included the terms *acceptance* and *welcoming*, along with *open*, *diverse* and *non-judging*. You mentioned a personal sense of acceptance, as one person treasures the “kind acceptance of my concerns and shortcomings” – as well as a welcoming environment that includes all ages, all races and ethnicities, all genders and sexual identities. One person told of being “moved to tears one service when the song we sang included sexual orientation in the lyrics,” and another spoke of a “visit two weeks ago with my physically handicapped granddaughter, that was so affirming and inclusive it moved me to tears.”

Our Strategic End to be Radically Inclusive is: Reaching out to embrace all, our congregation challenges itself to grow with new voices, ideas and experiences. The input on this strategic end was quite varied, and reflected both individual experiences and collective commitments. Your

comments included suggestions about the language we choose, about our attitudes and behaviors; about artwork, about clearer signs, better building design and more varied scheduling to increase accessibility of our programs and activities.

Some suggested new or increased collaboration with those of other faith traditions, or with people and groups in diverse communities in the area. As I read through the wide variety of proposed solutions, I realized that perhaps we need to work on defining the gap we are trying to close. If we want to be radically inclusive by reaching out to embrace all, we might need to ask, who are we currently not embracing, who are we unintentionally making “the other” and so falling short of our vision to include, and how can we reach out and truly welcome them? And one comment raised a question that highlights the complexity of this work, “How can we be inclusive and still build cohesion?” How do we sustain the bonds of love and commitment, how do we really welcome all into the circle of belonging, and how do we embrace the changes that are a natural part of that welcoming, part of expanding the circle? This is when I fall in love with this Vision and this congregation all over again, as we are called into uncharted territory to discover how most deeply to live into our values and commitments, to strengthen the human values that are our foundation, and to be always more active in welcoming and including all.

And so we arrive at the third part of the Vision, to be Justice Centered. And again, the comments on the history wall echo the importance of this congregation’s passion and action for social justice in your sense of connection here – what one person called this congregation’s “unabashed commitment to social justice.” Perhaps one comment sums it up pretty well, “Touched by the spirit through justice, words and loving hearts.”

The Strategic End to be Justice Centered reads: Inspired by our UU values, our congregation is organized and empowered to act in advancing justice in our local and global communities. Your suggestions for action on that Strategic End included exercising our democratic power through the vote, deepening and expanding our external partnerships, and organizing ourselves so that people may more easily get involved to live into their passion to create more justice in the world.

So there we have it: the Vision to be a spiritual community for our time, theologically diverse, radically inclusive, justice centered. This is a vision that speaks to who this congregation has been, why you are here, who it is now, and who it might yet become. This is the vision of a congregation at the forefront of our faith movement, passionate about our guiding principles of human worth and dignity, justice and compassion, and the interdependent web of all existence.

This is not an easy vision, nor one that will be quickly achieved – but it is a Vision, and these are Strategic Ends, that are worth it: worth our time and commitment, worth our financial support, worth getting through the discomfort of becoming something new, learning and building a new way of being in the world.

Sources:

Meaning of Theos retrieved from <https://www.quora.com/What-does-the-ancient-Greek-word-Theos-mean-in-all-its-usages-and-connotations-How-can-it-be-explained-without-using-the-word-God>