

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 2009

WHY CHURCH?

The congregation as they entered the sanctuary was asked to write on a card why they come to church, why they came to this church today or why they attend this particular church. The cards were collected during the offering and used during the sermon to bring the voices of the congregation.

- I come for the peace it brings me. I come for my family. I come to be part of something.
- To sing and experience sacred space and time.
- I'm not always sure why I attend; the ritual itself provides space for me and I nearly always leave more inspired about something new.
- I gone (sic) to church because I like to know this minister better and see my friends.
- Well, today I had a job to do that I had volunteered for...but I would have come anyway for: community, spiritual fulfillment and it is a cumulative thing. Any given Sunday may not be that impressive but it builds over time.
- For the potluck lunch and to meet the new minister.
- Spiritual nourishment; intellectual stimulation; to see everyone and catch up with them; enrichment; "time out" to slow down and get in touch with what's important. I could say that I came to raise my voice in celestial song, but I really came to keep the choir in line...
- I came because of the community and people. I came because it is the only progressive/liberal church in Wakefield and I want it to stay open.
- Today I am here because showing up is 50% of lie. I come to church as a rule because it feels good.
- I came out of habit born of needing a weekly change of pace, a chance for reflection and involvement in church activities.
- I came to church today for quiet time to listen and reflect. I also came for listening to the music. Church enables me to have conscious contact with my higher power, providing an inner and outer serenity. I also came because I am trying to become a member of the UU Community in Wakefield.
- Sunday services help to ground me. The church community and activities help to fulfill me.
- To share the fellowship and hear a message; to reflect on my week past and week coming.

- I'm feeling the need for spiritual sustenance.
- Liberal religious testimony. Not required to conform to answer in the back of the book (could concentrate on message of Jesus rather the special claim of who he was.)
- I was supposed to bring my daughter and my nametags back—and I forgot them. Actually, nearly all my Wakefield friends are here, and I wouldn't fit in at any other church. And I'm here for the music, which my Connecticut Fellowship didn't have.
- I come to this church: for continuity, for personal growth, for respite, spiritual, intellectual, emotional, for fun.
- This church plays a critical part in and provides the right context for connecting the material and the spiritual; helping us interface with the community; enjoying getting to know many great people.

SERMON: Why Church?

Reverend Maddie Sifantus

So I wonder why you bother? Why do you head out the door and come here to sit in these familiar pews, where many have sat before you over the years? Why do you drag yourself away from the Sunday papers or surfing the internet to find a place to park, brave icy sidewalks and walk in the back doors of this sanctuary? And why do you come here, rather one of the other faith communities in Wakefield or the busy UU Church in Reading, just down the way? What do you find here? What is special about this place? Is it this historic building, the oldest church building in Wakefield? Is it the ideas you find here—or don't find here? Is it the friendships you treasure?

Or perhaps this is the first time you've come here. Why did you leave your morning coffee and walk into a place that is all new to you? What is it you have come here to find?

Last week in a lay lead service many of you talked about what this place means to you. I am sorry to have missed it, but I did receive some news of what was said. I know that several of you talked about the important friendships you have made here. Others said that they need the “wisdom of all the stories”, “many versions or many pieces of one mystery.” Or as Nancy Trimper said: “It's the first church I've attended where I didn't have to ‘fake it’.”

Let's see what you have said about why you came to church this morning:

(read some of the papers)

In this congregation, words of a covenant are spoken when the chalice is being lit, just as we did this morning. A covenant is what this congregation can affirm—a statement of purpose, if you like. You remember, we said together:

Love is the doctrine of this church
The quest of truth is its sacrament,
And service is its prayer.
This is our covenant –
To dwell together in peace,
To seek knowledge in freedom,
To serve humanity in fellowship,
To the end that all souls shall grow into
harmony with the Divine.

This covenant is was written by L. Griswold Williams who was a Universalist minister early in the Twentieth Century. Universalism is the heritage of this congregation, as it was Universalist before the merger with the Unitarians in 1961. I invite you to join me in two weeks, on February 22, when I think more deeply about the Universalist root of our faith, which we still affirm by saying this covenant weekly.

We are what are known as a non-creedal denomination—but we can covenant to follow a quest together toward the one mystery our fellow pew member mentioned: a vision quest together. As you may know, for many years I visited many of our Unitarian Universalist congregations to lead worship or work with choirs. As I traveled around our congregations, I found many that repeat an affirmation or covenant every week, usually near the beginning of their service—the same one week after week, usually. Another one I heard a lot is this one:

Love is the spirit of this church, the quest for truth
Is its sacrament, and service is its prayer.
This is our great covenant: To dwell together in peace,
To seek the truth in love, and to help one another.

There is the vision of a congregation made plain—their worthy intention, if you will. Their vision for what they do together. By these words, a congregation states for its members why they gather. By being in community, saying these words, they are affirming that for this time together, this is where they choose to be. This is where they covenant with each other to be in right relations, to listen and act with love, to serve each other, the community and the world. And they choose to come that particular congregation in community as part of the search for truth and meaning, just as you have chosen to come here today. What words of intention would you say today—for this place?

“According to the late James Luther Adams, Unitarian Universalist theologian, people come together seeking “intimacy and ultimacy”. Intimacy is finding authentic and meaningful friendship, and ultimacy is finding meaning in our lives, by exploring our deepest beliefs.”¹ We choose to come together in congregations, because, deep in our hearts we believe it can make a difference- in our own lives, in that of our community, even in our troubled world. Since we are “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality”, as Martin Luther King said and we read together several weeks ago, since “we are tied in a single garment of destiny”, we may as well come into this place, this gathered company, this community of “sacred conscience” to think on what has meaning in our lives, to make meaning together with our families, our neighbors and our friends, to be a voice of liberal religion and diversity, to be a place of caring and service. We gathered in this historic building and in our Unitarian Universalist Association have chosen a certain path which has lead us here.

Let’s see some more of what you have said about why you came to church this morning:
(read some of the papers)

Why do you do it? You could be sleeping in or working on your taxes, but yet you are here. Why do you do it? Some of you think about the furnace or fix the plaster around our stained glass window of the Good Shepherd, otherwise known as Jesus of Nazereth. Someone else shows a bride and groom around the building in case they want to be married here, just as many couples have in the past—perhaps even some of you. Friendly discussions occur. Perhaps sometimes *not* so friendly discussions. Phone calls are made. You have had to decide to take down your spire. And whether you should become a fellowship without a minister. Or even if you should sell this building we are gathered in this morning. You decided not to. But that means how do you fix the roof and who is going to look after all the details of an historic building such as these. And I am blessed that you decided to have a minister after all and asked me to come on board. Why do you do all this, when life these days can be full of oh-so-many other activities, especially in this increasingly secular age?

I have had some folders in my file cabinet these last years where from time to time I have slipped a sermon idea or two, a reading or poem that has particularly spoken to me, songs that speak to certain issues, and the like. On one of those folders some years ago I wrote the question “Why church?” What’s the reason for it? Earlier this week, I mentioned to a colleague, that I would be with you this morning,, this time thinking about “why church”. Erin’s answer to my

¹ Saphier, Margie King. Excerpt from column in The Meeting House News, First Parish in Concord, 10-22-08.

question was: “why not?” Andrew Kennedy gives us a glimpse of one answer: He says: “And through *these people*, young and old, known and unknown, we reach out, both backward into history and forward into the future, to link together the generations in this imperfect, but blessed community of memory and hope.”² Through *these people*.

(read more papers)

So one answer to the question *Why Church?* is “these people”.

There is another affirmation that I hear every so often in our UU churches and which I use at the ecumenical service I do at a nursing home once a month. It reads:

In the freedom of the truth,
And the spirit of Jesus,
We unite for the worship of God
And the service of all.

Seems appropriate to say that under the window of the Good Shepherd somehow. Charles Gordon Ames, the writer of that affirmation, had little formal training. Ames was a Free Baptist home missionary in Minnesota in his early years. In 1859 he gathered the Unitarian Church in Bloomington, Illinois, “the church of Lincoln’s friends” and became a propagandist for Lincoln. For twenty years he served the Church of Disciples, Unitarian in Boston. The text of our the affirmation I just read was devised circa 1880 as the covenant for the Spring Garden Unitarian Society in Philadelphia, which he also founded.³ Four answers for why we might come to church: history, tradition, the search for truth, and a people gathered.

So how do we answer the question, *why church*, here in Wakefield, where you have for some time now been struggling with the numbers in the pews? How should you address the issues? What sorts of decisions should you be making? And not making a decision is, of course, a decision in itself. Do you go for broke, and use what resources you have left to try to revitalize or rebuild this historic place? Or do you do what many other small churches have done, even here in UU rich Massachusetts—choose to close the doors. No, there is no shame when a congregation chooses to close its doors—sadness for sure, but no shame. You can talk to those among you who came here after the Woburn church closed many years ago.

But, wait, that is NOT what you have chosen to do. You have committed to stay in this building, a controversial decision to be sure. But a decision made. And now those of us gathered will need to find again the vision and mission for the Wakefield Unitarian Universalist Church

² Andrew C. Kennedy, 1997 UUMA Worship Materials Collection, altered.

³ *Between the Lines*, 108.

for the future, just as I am sure others have in the past over its rich history. Visions and missions are always meant to be revisited by each new generation.

I have to say that I, for one, see the possibilities here in Wakefield. You have a historic building, here in a central, visible part of the town. You have been here for generations. You are a voice for liberal religion for this community. You have folks attending of all ages, from elders to our *young folks*. We have single folks, gay folks, former Roman Catholics, music lovers, old time Universalists, humanists and others. You care about each other. You care about this place. And you care about the community you are located in. So you have the ingredients.

We began together just a month ago, you and I. I hope to be with you as you take a vision quest into your future. I will help all I can. However you chose to walk into your future, it is YOUR choice. One of the most valued parts of our UU heritage is our congregational polity—you get to decide what you do, what minister you may call, who you rent your building to, what curriculum you use with your children, what color you might paint your sanctuary, and whether to fix the furnace. That is what congregational polity means. You can have as much or as little to do with the Unitarian Universalist Association and the Massachusetts Bay District as you wish...but they are there so we do not have to stand all alone, you and I. There are resources and people to help us make our decisions, help us look at our mission and strengthen our community together where we can experience “intimacy and ultimacy.” And, in my theology, the power of prayer should not be overlooked!

I believe we have something of value here. Why do you continue to come here? Because you find something here of substance, something that feeds your soul, someplace where you can laugh and someplace where you can cry together, when need be. Here is a place the generations can come together to share a Story for All Ages—their story which is unfolding Sunday by Sunday, church activity by activity. History, tradition, the search for truth, and a people gathered. I encourage us to look forward towards an articulating vision for this place we love, perhaps even the creation of a new mission statement that is clear about our intentions. In this way we can know for ourselves what is essential about this place and radiate its “UU Wakefield-ness” to the larger community. But for today, I say that here we have come together to say to each other, “it is good to be together.” It is good to see these precious faces. It is good to sit in this space. We care about living, our lives and each other. We care about our world and what is good and true. May it continue to be so. Blessed be. Amen.