

“SANCTUARY OR BASECAMP?!”
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You did it! Look at this beautiful facility. By the way, as I looked at the weather this morning I saw that the wind chill was at minus 18 degrees. It makes me wonder what the line is between being a hearty Midwesterner and being a religious fanatic.

This morning I bring congratulations on behalf of a thousand congregations. You have become a flagship congregation in our Association. You are a model, an inspiration and a resource (more on this later).

Your steady growth is especially noteworthy given the times in which we live. We are living in a time of stunning cultural change in American religion. I don't know of anything that compares to what we are seeing. Famous religious changes like the Great Awakening of the 1740's is nothing compared to what we are experiencing. We have not seen anything like this since the Reformation—and I am not sure that even the Reformation can compare. [Alas, we don't have good statistics on the Reformation.]

Here are a few statistics that I find just breathtaking. They are breathtaking because of what they say about what is happening to the beliefs and attitudes of millions of people. In just eight years, between 2004 and 2012, the Presbyterian Church lost more than one quarter of its membership: 27%. The United Church of Christ, our closest cousin in the religious extended family, lost 26 percent of its membership. The Episcopal Church was down 20 percent during the same period. Remember, that is only *eight* years. Reform Jews, who are like us in many ways, are losing many of their young people.

Many people think Evangelical churches are growing, but that is not the case. The number of evangelicals is also declining. The Catholic Church has been relatively steady in membership,

but that is very misleading. Millions of white Catholics have left and are leaving the faith. It is only because of millions of Catholic immigrants, mostly from Mexico and Central America, that the Catholic church has maintained its membership.

I am frustrated that the total number of Unitarian Universalists is not much larger [and I will return to this in a bit]. Our membership has been pretty flat for the last decade. But in comparison to what is happening to other progressive religious groups, we are doing great.

If we look over a span of a lifetime, the change going on around us is jaw dropping. When I was a kid in public school, virtually all of my classmates identified with some religious group. Maybe they did not attend very often, but they had some sort of religious identity. Where I grew up in San Antonio, Texas, there were lots of Catholics. And I had friends who were Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian and Episcopalian. I even knew a couple of Jewish kids.

When I went to college in the 1960s, 95 percent—19 out of every 20—people in their 20's claimed some sort of religious identity. In the year 2000 the number who checked “none” [n-o-n-e] had gone from 5 percent to 12 percent—or from one in twenty to one in eight. That is a significant change. But since the year 2000 the number of “nones” among young people has exploded. The last number I saw was *35 percent*. “None of the above” is now the largest religious group for the millennial generation.

Yet while all this decline of religious participation is going on all around you, you are now almost *seven times as large* as you were 24 years ago. The way this congregation has thrived would be a great story in any time. The fact that you have all this during an era of historic decline in religion is a miracle. [I know most of us don't believe in miracles, but here you are.]

Today I am issuing a preemptive presidential pardon. I hereby give you permission to indulge in a little smugness. You may wallow in self congratulation and have an orgy of conceit. This pardon is good for one week, beginning today.

We are experiencing a historic decline of religion in America, yet your congregation is thriving and growing. What in the world is going on?

I think both stories—the story of the amazing decline of religion in America and your own story of vitality and growth—have important lessons to teach us.

The first lesson is that there is no place, no “market” if you will, for the kind of religious bodies that people are leaving. When young people think about religion today they think of narrow mindedness, hypocrisy, intolerance, empty ritual, rigid hierarchy, and self serving and even abusive clergy. Young people especially want no part of religious dogma that marginalizes their lgbt friends or denies the knowledge science has created in the last 500 years.

Your story also teaches us that people will flock to a spiritual community that speaks to their real spiritual needs—a place where they are loved and accepted, a place where they are challenged, a place where they can grow, a place to raise children, a place where they can join hands with others to help heal a troubled world. In a meeting here yesterday I heard powerful stories of how this congregation is just such a place.

The need for spiritual community is as great today as it has ever been. Human beings are still deeply relational creatures who seek meaning and meaningful relationships. In some ways the need is greater today. Americans are, despite all the social media and urbanization, profoundly isolated. Social psychology studies show that Americans have fewer close relationships than they did a generation ago. We might be the loneliest people who have ever lived. Really. A congregation like this one fills a huge need.

The truth is that the vast majority of the millions of religiously homeless “nones” are not rejecting spirituality and religion. They are rejecting bad religion—religion that is lifeless, petty, backward, self absorbed, anti-intellectual, pompous and hypocritical.

And what do they want? They want religion that accepts lgbt people as well as straight people. They want spiritual depth. They want to *experience* spirituality. They want real community with deep, committed and enduring relationships. They want a place that does not insult their intelligence and ask them to accept a medieval world view. And the nones want to make a difference in the world. They want a community where they join hands with others to make our world more compassionate and more just.

Does any of this sound familiar? Open. Accepting. Deep. Relational. Respectful of humanity’s great spiritual traditions. Committed to putting our religious values into action in our personal lives and in the wider world.

Tens of millions of Americans are hungry for spiritual depth and spiritual community. They know, at some level, that the banality of consumer culture will never satisfy their spiritual hunger. Facebook and Twitter are fine, but they cannot satisfy our need to be in deep relationship, to truly know and be known, to truly love and be loved.

Do you see the irony? Do you see the tragedy? We are witnessing nothing less than a spiritual mass migration away from religion as we have known it. But these millions are wandering in a cultural desert; they are spiritually lonely, lost, homeless, and starving.

And we could be their home! We should be their religious home. The nones are us. They share our values. They share our aspirations. They share our world view.

They seek a new way. They seek religion that is not about believing this or that. They don't want a religion that asks them to believe what they find unbelievable.

By the way, we Americans give way too much emphasis to what people believe. A religious community is much more about how people treat one another and what they do together than about what they believe. Just look over time. Beliefs change. Catholics don't believe what they did 400 years ago. Mormons don't believe what they did 100 years ago. Buddhists never believed anything. It's not the lyrics that matter; it's the music.

Ours is not a faith that is held together by belief. Religion, I am convinced, is about what we love. Religion ultimately is about falling in love. It is about experiencing that love (not reading about it). It is about being faithful to what we love and what we aspire to become.

Religion that is about being faithful to what we hold sacred, to what calls to us in the depth of our being—this is religion that can and should thrive. This is what millions seek.

The love of which I speak reaches out. It can't help but reach out. Love is the name we give to our desire to connect, really connect. To connect with ourselves, to connect with others, to connect with this amazing universe that transcends us and that holds us. Love cannot stand to see others suffer. If I practice the kind of love that Jesus and the Buddha and so many other great spirits speak of, I cannot be indifferent. Love does not turn its back.

I am convinced that reaching out to the spiritually hungry is not something we should do because it is good for this congregation or good for the UUA. We reach out because we must, because love demands it. This is what it means to practice our faith.

The title of this sermon is, “Home: Sanctuary or Base Camp?” What will this wonderful new facility of yours be?

The answer is that it must be both. Of course it is a sanctuary. It is a safe place, a place where you belong and are welcomed, a place where you take nourishment and grow strong, a place where you come when you are weak and need support.

But it must be more. You know this. Just look at your history. This is a base camp. You are builders and adventurers. You look around and see new opportunities.

Oh, and one more thing. You are also now a flagship congregation in our movement. I wonder if you fully appreciate the role you play in our movement. You are a model and an inspiration. You are a resource for others.

I have a challenge for you today. I have no doubt that you will continue to thrive. I want to challenge you to embrace a new role in our wider Association. How can we partner together to help the best that is here go viral? How can you be a base camp for our larger movement? Be bold. Dream big. Let’s imagine what we might do together.

We live in amazing times. We are in the chaotic midst of a transition into a new era. A new generation is rejecting old ways that no longer serve. I think that is a good thing.

At our very core we UU’s are a religious movement born in rebellion against old ways. Look at Servetus rebelling against orthodoxy. Look at Priestly, at Emerson, at Parker. Look at Ballou and Channing. Look at the new humanism of the last century. Look at Susan B. Anthony and Margaret Fuller. Look at the thousands who have stood on the side of love and said that slavery is wrong, discrimination against blacks, Latinos, gays, lesbians, and Muslims is wrong.

At our best, we embrace change. We see new possibilities. As one of our hymns says, we revere the past but trust the dawning future more.

So go ahead. Wallow in self congratulation for a week.

After that, let’s get to work together. Let’s look to the future. What are we called to be? What are we called to do? Just imagine the possibilities before us.

I can’t wait to see what we can do together. I can’t wait.

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