

A Sign of the Times

October 21, 2007

When I arrived at UUMAN for the first time I remember being struck by the condition of the sign out front. I could hardly read it from the road and it appeared small, worn and dirty, as it is today. It stands quite in contrast to the magnificence and beauty of this building and all of the care that is taken to keep it maintained. It's no surprise that you were compelled to create a new sign, worthy of all of this. As most of you know a new sign is in the works. I've been shown, as most of you have the drawing of the initial design and while some adjustments have been made to meet city regulations, it will look basically like the drawing. The new sign will have a beautiful stone base and sides. The logo of the church with its lovely chalice symbol on top will be displayed in letters approximately nine inches tall. And underneath will be the words Unitarian Universalist in bold letters and then Metro Atlanta North.

There will also be a reader board where you can have a saying that reflects who you are to passersby. What a difference this sign will be for this church! It will make a clear, bold, statement. "We are here and here to stay." It will also say "this is who we are."

As recently as twenty five years ago in the south, UU churches were built in secluded areas, in the woods, away from roads, down a long drive with just a modest or even tiny sign directing people in. For those of you who have grown up in the south, it's not hard to understand the reasons for this. There has been a lot of fear of making waves, of being vilified and of vandalism, because of our faith. And of course that has happened to our churches and not just in the south.

In the last twenty years or so, UU churches have become gradually bolder in their location of churches and in their witnessing for social justice in the community. The campaign the UUA has started will make every UU church more known to the public. The new sign will make residents in Metro Atlanta North more aware of this church. What will this mean to UUMAN? I'm sure for some of you this is a scary thing. And not just because you will be more visible. You are also making an institutional statement in establishing a sign that is so striking and substantial.

I don't know about you, but I find myself oddly nostalgic whenever I make a change to something in my life even when the old something doesn't make me happy anymore. I feel a pang of sadness letting go of old clothing that is too worn or is stained. And it isn't until I'm about to say goodbye to something that I reflect on the positive things that will be lost with its absence. Even as a newcomer here, I feel a bit of wistful grief about giving up such a homey looking sign. The sign that when it was new and clean said, we are unconventional, we are not terribly concerned about appearances, and we are pretty down to earth. We value simplicity. We are a small but happy group of people.

But letting go of some of these attributes makes way for new ones. So the new sign will have a different character and feel. When I look at the picture of its design, I think: these people are reaching out. They want me to know who they are. They have a sense of beauty. And they are an institution, not just a small independent church.

That word, institution can have many associations for us. It can imply bureaucracy or authoritarianism, both attributes we would not want in our churches. But an institution does not have to mean those things at all. Institution at its most basic definition is an organization founded on principles and purposes that are more meaningful to those who create it than any individual desire. An institution becomes an entity with an ethical, legal, and substantial life of its own. Because this is an institution upholding a faith, it has a spiritual life of its own as well. The work of the congregation becomes nourishing and growing that life.

As a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, UUMAN is part of a larger institution as well, although many of us prefer the word 'movement.' It has more of the connotation of activity and growth than the word 'institution.' Both are powerful words and institution implies solidity and permanence. Today is UUMAN's Association Sunday. We are doing today what congregations all over the country are doing at this time of year. We are celebrating the Association that we have with all of these other congregations.

Indeed, the purpose of the UUA is to bring together congregations to act on our principles and purposes in ways no congregation could do alone. By joining our resources together, we can develop programs, serve the greater needs of the denomination through grants and consulting services, and be a united voice for justice, reaching out into many parts of the world. The combined power of congregations is far greater than we realize, not just by the dues each congregation makes to the UUA but by each and every congregation's work in the world, and each and every individual that is inspired out of this faith to make a positive change in society.

The UUA functions as an emissary of news from other congregations and in many ways, this is their most valuable function. The best practices, the most inspiring stories, the ingenious ways of solving problems are available to any congregation for the asking. Pick up the UUWorld magazine and you are in touch with UU's all over the world. Join an email group related to RE, or leadership, or music, or ministry or one of the many other UU interest groups and you have friends and ideas from all over the country and in some cases the world. Congregations across the country form UU ancillary organizations about UU history, Women in the UU movement, UU Christian fellowship, GLBT concerns, legislative action, and racial equality to name a few. While not directly supported by the UUA, these organizations exist because there is a central organization within which they can become known.

So the UUA functions as a network of resources and communication for all of us.

The existence of the UUA and the free churches it unites within a common movement reveals another way in which we are a covenantal institution. We do not unite under dogma or theology per se but rather through how we promise we will be with each other and how we will act in the world. An example of this here is the program that set standards for becoming a Welcoming Congregation. This congregation went through a process of covenanting to be welcoming to GLBT people. The Journey to Wholeness program does this for racial justice and equality.

President of the UUA Bill Sinkford says, "We see ourselves as a tiny and fairly radical movement. But a major study in 1990 found twice as many people who identified themselves as Unitarian Universalists as were on our rolls; three years ago, a similar study turned up four times as many. How many might there be if more people knew what we stand for?"

But another corrective point must be made. We are no longer the exclusive home for liberal religion. We have been at the forefront of the women's movement, acceptance of GLBT persons, and racial equality. But as Sinkford points out, "We have spent most of the last forty years talking to ourselves about who we are. ... we have not noticed that much of the religious world has been shifting toward us. Despite the well-funded din from the religious right, most Americans have decided some things in our favor: Empowerment of women is a good thing. Gay and lesbian persons are human beings and are to be valued, not discriminated against. The world is a religiously pluralistic place; there is no one gate to the city." His point is that we are more mainstream now than we allow ourselves to notice.

Not only do we need to speak out about who we are in order to inform others, we need to speak out in order to inform ourselves about other people. We can't really know others until we engage in a mutual conversation

with them. That means revealing our beliefs and listening to the beliefs of others. We have always been small and yet mighty in our influence. Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs says that we tend to see ourselves as the leaven in the loaf rather than the bread. He says, "I insist that we can be the bread. But only when we can confess our own impoverishment, only when we can enter back into respectful conversation with those with whom we disagree, only when we ask ourselves again the covenantal question: What shall we promise one another and in what interest?"

His statements were based on the observation that we don't always practice the openness we preach. Whenever we fail to embrace a UU whose political beliefs we disagree with, or implicitly make them feel unwelcome, whenever we reject out of hand the religious language that some of among us hunger for, we are rejecting the covenant that is the foundation of our faith.

Eller-Isaacs says, "There is always a gulf between how we behave and what we aspire to be. This tension has played out in our tradition in our ambivalence and lack of clarity in matters of identity. Are we intellectual elite? Are we a church intended only for progressive liberals with advanced degrees, the people Garrison Keillor calls "the chronically overeducated"? Or are we compelled by our theology to expand our understanding of whom we mean when we say "we"?"

Most Americans don't know who we are. Now is the time that we will begin to make ourselves known. You are taking a big step by creating this sign. I believe about half of the money has been raised so far. It is going to be built in faith that you will step up to fully fund it. And I'm sure you will. This will be UUMAN's opportunity to clarify who you mean by 'we.' Because more people could be asking "Who are you?" And what will you tell them? There are so many things to say.

This weekend we had a chance to get together with a program consultant, Connie Goodbread, for some hours to reflect on questions like this. We asked "What is the most exciting or meaningful experience you've had as a member of UUMAN?" And we listened to the stories of those experiences and identified the core values they represented. We asked, "What have been the pivotal moments in UUMAN's history?" And we listened to the stories and looked at the patterns they created over the 17 years of this congregation's life. These are the kind of processes that can lead UUMAN to a deeper understanding of its past, present and the future that you wish to create. So we will do a lot more of this together.

It's a sign of the times, this bold move on your part. You are a part of UU history in the making. You are creating a new willingness to be known and in the process deepening your understanding of yourselves and what it means to be Unitarian Universalist. It's a healthy leap of faith and I believe it will serve you well.

Thank you for your support of our Association today. For the UUA has made it possible for us to do this work together and for that I am very grateful. May this time of Interim Ministry bring us all closer to the wholeness we hunger for and to the movement of which we are all an important part.

May it be so.