

## **“Welcoming our new Minister” by Harold Smelt**

Before I start, it is probably a good idea to give some of the history of this sermon. Its genesis was some thoughts I had while taking a long walk on a rainy night back in April. It was a time of unrest in our congregation, and I had the desire to cast some perspective on that turmoil; to call on other members of the congregation to step forward and help lead us to a better, or at least quieter, place.

Many weeks passed, and it became necessary to do some re-writing. It looked like we were going to call a settled minister soon, some new leaders HAD stepped forward and excitement was growing in the church.

And now a few more weeks have passed. What a rollercoaster! Our “call” was declined, and new decisions needed to be made by the lay leaders of our church. I’m proud of how these new decisions are being handled. The painful lessons of the recent past seem to have been well learned. So here is version number 3 of my sermon. You’ll notice that our new minister is always a “him”; that’s one hold over from previous versions I didn’t take the time to change. Perhaps you’ll be able to pick out which episode of our recent history has shaped the different themes, but the primary theme, the need for us to stand on our own and take responsibility for our future, is a constant throughout all of the revisions.

One last disclaimer: These ideas were first put down on paper before I became your Treasurer and thereby an ex officio Board of Trustees member. The decision to take THAT step came from my NEXT long walk in the rain. So I should probably say that these thoughts are mine and mine alone, and do not necessarily represent the thinking or wishes of other Board members.

Ahem...

Like most of our congregation, I was eagerly awaiting the arrival of our new minister. It is always exciting to welcome a new face into our midst, to learn from them and be challenged by them to think in new ways. But amid all that excitement, I couldn’t help but feel a little anxiety about what I’ll call our collective Messiah Complex; the idea that somehow a single person will drop in to TUUC and somehow “fix” everything, who will, to continue with my biblical metaphor, lead us to a promised land.

I can remember well the excitement surrounding the arrival of our last settled minister. The ministerial search committee reported to us, “He’s young!”, “He’s energetic!”, and “He’s got great ideas!” The expectations were SO high; how could one person possibly live up to them. It really should not have been a surprise to

learn that he was fallible just like the rest of us, but for some that was a crushing discovery.

So when we find a new minister, will he lead us to the promised land? I hope we don't ask him to, at least not without our help.

Leadership within a church, especially a UU church, takes many forms. We will look to our new minister for spiritual leadership. Under our minister's guidance will be important programs like pastoral care, religious education, social justice and many of the social events that are at the heart of our congregation. His or her duties will include preparations of sermons, participation in the many committees, oversight of staff and the music program and much, much more. We hope our new minister will ask us questions that make us uncomfortable, help us become our better selves, make this a place of religious fellowship, and not just a clubby little group of friends and a nice place to have coffee on Sunday.

But that is only half of the picture. We, the congregation of TUUC, are and must always be, an integral part of the leadership of this organization. This is the Governance side of the equation, with our Board of Trustees doing the essential, if unexciting, tasks of fiduciary oversight, human resources decisions, and long range planning. Those involved in the governance of our church help set priorities and make possible the spiritual growth that happens here.

Please note that both sides of this equation, both the Ministry and Governance sides, are so much bigger than just one Minister and just the Board. Both sides are supported in hundreds of ways by the members of our congregation. Congregational leadership doesn't only come from our Trustees. It comes from every member who willingly takes on some role in support of this congregation.

- It is the stewards who show up every Sunday to open the doors and make sure the sound system works.
- It is the greeters and ushers who smile when you walk in the door and host the welcoming circle for our guests.
- It is the choir making a joyful noise, the coffee table setters, and anyone who has helped organize a family game night, a Valentines dance, or a Youth Group sleepover.
- It is the dedicated parents downstairs teaching the next generation of UU's about our 7 principals.

- It is everyone who has participated in one of our fundraising events, from working the concession stand at a Seahawks game to endless days of preparation in support of our auction.
- It is those quiet people who love and support our library and all the other unrecognized people who contribute to keeping this spiritual home a warm and welcoming place.
- And of course, it is every member who has agreed to serve on or lead a committee or participate in some way in our Program Council. The number of committees we have is mind boggling. Worship, Religious Education, Property, Committee on Ministry, Finance, Design & Décor, and more. All do the essential work needed to support a diverse and growing church of 250-plus people.

Think about all the policy issues that have been addressed by our congregation just in the last year or two.

- We have been dealing with the wonderful problems of growth. Do we have enough parking? If we start having two services, when will the coffee hour be and how will one choir support two services? Is there enough room for all our kids in the RE program?
- We've been looking towards the future, planning what to do with our Orchard Street property and exploring options for a new home. How best to take advantage of the resources we have? What is our highest priority for our new site? What programs do we want our new home to support?
- We've had a change in personnel with the leaving of our music director and now our interim minister.
- And of course, we've had the ministerial search process. Through the dedicated commitment of five individuals, that process looked like it was coming to a fruitful close. At today's congregational meeting, we'll be discussing our next steps and whether or not to start that process over.

All of this has happened through the combined leadership of our Board and Committees in coordination with our interim minister. It doesn't just happen by itself.

Together, our Board and our new minister, supported by the congregation, must agree upon a vision for our future, a mission that gives our being here meaning, and

a plan to get us there. It is a joint decision. We must not simply lay this at the feet of our new minister.

We've all heard the joke that leading UU's is a lot like herding cats. Well, wisdom should be heeded no matter where you find it, even if it is in an old joke that still makes you laugh or you read it on a bumper sticker. We ARE a hard group to lead. Who would want the job?! But the more positive attributes of open-mindedness and thoughtfulness also apply to us. And these must be brought together in service of both Ministerial and Governance programs. Don't worry, it can be done.

When preparing this sermon, I thought of many different ways to present this duality.

- How about a set of scales, balancing the Ministerial with the Governance, supported by the congregation in the middle?
- Or a table, representing the organization of TUUC, supported by two equally strong pillars?
- I briefly considered a tug of war, but this is not a competition...
- How about a marriage, with both sides committing to the hard work of sustaining the relationship?

I finally settled instead on the picture of a person, making his way down a long road, carrying a heavy load. Along comes a friendly fellow traveler, who offers to help shoulder the burden. For this to work, the two travelers must agree on where they are going, and they must coordinate their efforts. They must share a common purpose, a "vision" if you will. I'm sure there will be some mis-steps at the start, some bumping of elbows and some awkward moments with the shared load swinging wildly back in forth until balance is achieved.

If all this sounds like a lot of work, it is. Why not just let our Minister do the work for us? Having a strong leader can be so EASY. What is easier than letting someone else make all the hard decisions? You don't need to think about anything too hard, and more importantly, you don't need to attend any of those endless committee meetings! If you don't like the decisions being made, you can happily complain and say, "Well, they never asked me..."

But just like leaning on a crutch can make your muscles weak, leaning on a strong leader leaves the organization weaker for the inevitable time when the leader leaves,

or worse, starts to lead in a direction we don't want to go. Then what happens? Does everything come to a grinding halt? Does that metaphorical load go crashing to the ground?

One reason I chose to use the analogy of a traveler carrying a heavy load is that ownership of that load is never in doubt. The burden of leading TUUC belongs here, with us. On that inevitable day when we again find ourselves without a minister, either through an amicable parting of ways or because we can no longer agree on our destination and how to get there, we must still be strong enough to carry that load by ourselves.

Ministers come and go, but the institution of TUUC remains. Even better than "institution", I should say that the "heart" remains. We have already experienced some bumpy stretches of road in our long history. Members have come and gone and Ministers have come and gone, but TUUC remains. Long time members like Mary Watson, Claire Hull, Bob and Virginia Lane & Darla Brunquell are examples of that heart, providing the continuity that is TUUC, bridging the organization from minister to minister, building to building, and generation to generation.

All religious communities have ceremonies that reinforce a sense of community, a sense of religious identity. The ceremonies that mark hatchings, matchings and dispatchings also serve to bind the community more tightly together. They are our shared heritage and experience. From my perspective, the most significant ceremony of this kind at TUUC is the welcoming of new members. Current members are asked to stand and be seen. Think about that! You are standing in witness to your commitment to this community! Then as a group, we covenant with our new members, to support them in their search for truth and meaning. In this most basic act we show where the true heart of our community is. The new members aren't making promises to our minister; WE are making promises to them, to include them in our community and to help lead them as best as we are able. In the future we need to remind ourselves of the significance of this act each and every time we do it.

Many of us can remember when we wrote and signed our Covenant of Right Relations. And amazingly, many in this room can't. Due to our recent growth, perhaps half of our current congregation was not around when the Covenant of Right Relations was created. This document established norms and guidelines for how we interact with each other, fostering an atmosphere of respect and sensitivity for the feeling of others. The final document was printed up in a very large format and set on an easel here in the sanctuary, and all members were invited to sign,

covenanting to each other to abide by these simple rules. It has been years since I've read the Covenant, but my memory is that it really was much like the book Everything I need to know I learned in Kindergarten only with fancier words. It was basic things like "Share", "Listen", "Wait your turn", & "Play nicely with others".

Humor aside, creation of the Covenant of Right Relations was a milestone event in this church and was a serious act of community building. The Jewish tradition includes the celebration of Rosh Hashanah, a time to review your actions of the past year and to attempt to right your relationships with those in your community. Perhaps we should periodically do the same, revisiting our covenant of right relations, reaffirming our sense of who we are, and renewing our commitment to support our community.

Welcoming a new minister into our community is similarly a significant event. But it is only the first step. Finding him will be hard, but even harder will be laying the foundation of our relationship. Together we will refine our mission and vision. I'm sure there will be some more bumps in the road. I'm equally sure that we will get past these, just like we always have.

So when our new minister gets here, let's welcome him with open arms! Hallelujah! But don't expect miracles...

Let him minister to us. There is so much he can share and help us with. But remember, there are limits to what we can, and should, ask him to do for us.

Let him show us the way to be our better selves. But remember that we share the burden of charting our way as well.

And always remember where the true heart of TUUC really lies.

Amen & Blessed Be.