



**To Fulfill Your Promise:  
An Interim Minister's Report  
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The cover of your Order of Service is called a Wordcloud. The size of the words is determined by their frequency. The words are from the timeline exercise we did in November, where you wrote down your feelings about things that happened.

From my colleague Meg Riley, "Here's how I wish change happened. Change says to the universe, *Hey, I'd like to happen now!*  
And the Universe replies with ease and joy,  
*That's terrific! Happen then!*  
And change happens,  
a tiny sweet bud opening into a beautiful flower.

"Here's how it seems change mostly does happen:  
"Change says to the Universe, *Hey, I'd like to happen now!*  
And before the Universe can have an opinion,  
Resistance says *No!*  
and Change says more loudly,  
trying to reach the Universe, *I'D LIKE TO HAPPEN NOW!*  
And Resistance jumps in and screams, *NO NO NO NO NO!*  
And the Universe, hearing some ruckus off in the distance,  
says *What?* And Change says,  
*I AM GOING TO HAPPEN WHETHER RESISTANCE LIKES IT OR NOT!* And a drama unfolds,  
Change versus Resistance,  
with some amount of change as its byproduct,  
though not always the change that asked to happen."

We think of the church as a family. A beloved community,

a religious community, a justice seeking community. What we don't expect are deception, rejection, name-calling, bitter fights.

We find the gap between the real and the ideal disturbing.

As Peter Steinke writes, "It's not that our metaphors and ideals are false but that we fail to realize that the church functions as an emotional *system*. As long as people gather and interact, emotional processes occur. There are positive aspects of these processes—joy, comfort, support, cooperation and friendship. But emotional systems are inherently anxious.

Anxiety has motivational power. It pushes and prods us toward innovation or transformation. If, however, it reaches a certain intensity, it prevents the very change it provokes. What is stimulus becomes restraint [or resistance: NO NO NO NO!] the system becomes too *reactive* to be *responsive*. (*How Your Church Family Works*)

The downside, therefore, is the intense anxiety [that sometimes arises] and distracts the congregation from its purpose, sets people at odds with each other, and builds walls against outsiders." (Church Family)

While "church fight" sounds like an oxymoron, it's a natural part of all relationship systems. Congregational skirmishes may be even more abusive than those that take place in less emotionally-charged groups. And when what we expect harmony and mutual respect to prevail a church fight can make us question our very existence and purpose.

In healthy congregations, the people who are most in position to enhance the health of the congregation are precisely those who have been empowered to be responsible—namely the leaders. They are the chief stewards; they are the people who are willing to be accountable for the welfare of the congregation. They set a tone, invite collaboration, make decisions, map a direction, establish boundaries, encourage self-expression, restrain what threatens the integrity of the whole, and keep the congregation's direction aligned with its purposes.

In systems thinking, a healthy congregation is *not one with an absence of issues*, but rather one that actively and responsibly addresses or heals its disturbances, (*Healthy Congregations*.)

In workshops that Peter Steinke conducts, he asks congregational leaders if they believe their congregations are healthier now than they were five years ago. Those who say yes are basically alike: They say we met a challenge, we stretched our resources, we examined what we were doing and changed course; we redefined our problems as opportunities. (*Healthy Congregations*)

Many of you are aware of the categories of congregational size. Smallest is the Family Church, then Pastoral then Program size congregations, then the large, or corporate church. Several years ago, when this congregation was dealing with growth issues, these concepts were introduced and discussed. Especially the Pastoral to Program size transition and the idea of the *Plateau Zone* in between.

A brief description: A *Pastoral-sized* congregation has an average Sunday attendance of between 50 and 150 bodies in the building. The minister has relationships with most of the members and is involved with most of the program life of the church. Members recognize each other's faces, know most people's names.

A *Program sized* congregation has an average Sunday attendance of between 150 and 400. It's known for the quality and variety of its programs—for children, youth, couples, seniors, and many other age and interest groups.

The Pastoral to Program size transition, meaning average attendance between 150 and 250 is the most difficult. When attendance exceeds 150 everybody *can't* know everyone else—the system becomes too complex. This transition zone creates a great sense of loss for members as folks describe feeling disconnected from one another and from the operational and decision-making side of the congregation.

At the same time, changes are required to accommodate growth.

The system is stressed.

It happened here. Growth occurred! Sunday attendance skyrocketed! It got crowded--seating and parking were strained.

The leadership proposed changes to deal with the size transition. Changes in governance, in staff and leadership responsibilities. There were personnel changes. There was the shift to going to two services. There were other changes. The system was stressed. And, inevitably conflict ensued. There were arguments. Name-calling. Tears. List-serve battles. It got nasty.

I've heard conflict like this blamed on so-called Self-Appointed Guardians Of The Status Quo. That's easy, but it just focuses on *individuals*. From a systems perspective, it isn't about personalities at all. If it isn't some people, it would be others.

Systems theory suggests the concept of homeostasis--the strong urge within a system to remain at a comfortable size. Sustained growth is a threat. Often the pattern is simple: Growth, conflict, then return to the previous size. That's what happened here.

**Your attendance went from a high of an average 220 bodies in the building with two services in 2007-08, to an average of 130 for the last three years.**

What went wrong? Well, from the perspective of homeostasis, things went right.

From the perspective of growth, I perceive that there was an assumption that everyone was on board with the whole growth thing and therefore would be supportive of the leadership suggesting necessary changes. I don't think there was enough discussion of what growth would mean. The trade-offs weren't clear. Two services mean I won't see all my friends! You mean to make room for newcomers the children might have their own chapel service instead of being with us?

Now in terms of congregational size, one size isn't necessarily better than another. Pastoral churches offer comfort and support. Program sized churches offer enriched programs, and greater resources for music and worship and outreach.

My colleague Robert Latham's book is provocatively titled *Moving on from Church Folly Lane: the Pastoral to Program Shift*. In it, he claims that the question of whether to grow is a *fake fight*.

If you have a strong sense of mission, identity, purpose,  
 if you are clear on  
 what change you want to make in the world  
 and for whom,  
*and you are doing it,*  
 if you are taking yourselves  
 and your religious life seriously,  
 then you will become an community  
 of irresistible spiritual vitality--  
 and growth will happen as a result.  
 And when you invite change to accommodate that growth,  
 enough of the congregation will be so  
 committed to the mission  
 that the forces of homeostasis  
 will be acknowledged  
 but will not prevail.

So what will be different next time? For I am sure there will be a next time. This congregation is composed of and attracts bright and talented people. There are strong bonds of affection between members and a powerful dedication to this church and its future.

A few years after you call your next minister there will be another period of growth--and you'll be, once again, in the dreaded *Transition Zone!*

There are some actions you can take to prepare yourselves--to improve the odds on a different result.

One, I'd suggest a covenant of right relations. There are resources for this. One that I've used is Gil Rendel's *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations*.

He suggests that covenants are statements of agreements as to how you are going to be with one another,

setting boundaries of acceptable behavior.  
 Understand that such a covenant is unenforceable  
 by some agency or committee--  
 there are no right-relations police.  
 Such an agreement is enforceable  
 only to the extent that members are willing  
 to call one another back to our best sense of ourselves if we stray.  
 And we will stray. We're human. So we make promises, break them,  
 Are called into account, and begin again in love.

When we live like this with one another,  
 we model our Unitarian Universalist values  
 for each other, our children, and the wider community.

And this offers an opportunity *to explore and deepen our spirituality.*

Promises made to others in a faith community and the relationships that can form from such a practice can strengthen and broaden commitment in deliberate, intentional, and disciplined ways.

[Pause]

Another way to prepare yourselves for the next conflict is *to learn how to disagree without making it personal.* Develop skills at conflict management. There are resources. One of them is Sharon Strand Ellison's *Taking the War Out of Our Words.*

An example of her approach:

She points out that when there are conflicting views, we immediately have a negative reaction to the person who disagrees with us.

We are likely to jump to the conclusion  
 that the person is not intelligent,  
 or intentionally mean, or hurtful,  
 or destructive or rude.  
 But when we learn to ask  
 follow-up fact-finding questions  
 in an open, honest, neutral and inviting manner,  
 the other person becomes non-defensive  
 and, as Ellison puts it, is “dis-armed.”  
 And conversation rather than debate is possible  
 And the chance to learn from each other is heightened.

So promises regarding behavior, and skills in handling disagreements are important.

And, of course, there's mission/vision work to be done.

Some might say, we have a perfectly good mission statement and vision statement--so that's covered, right?

But do these words still describe who you are and what you do as a religious community?

Statements can sometimes get in the way. It's not the having of the statements, it's the *living* of them that matters. *Do* you support one another on spiritual and ethical paths? What would that look like if your spiritual and ethical development it were a vital aspect of who you are as a faith community? In what tangible ways do you work for justice, dignity, and respect for the web of life?

Mission driven congregations evaluate their programs and activities at the end of the year to see how they advanced their mission. They plan for next year based on their evaluation.

During the conflict, one of the proposed changes that didn't happen for you was the move to policy governance. This model changes the board from managing the church to monitoring the mission and envisioning its evolution.

Its *evolution* is about broadening the mission beyond the statement--recognizing what else you do to fulfill your promise. The goal of your religious education program for children is to grow life-long UU's. What you teach your children is an important part of who you are as a church! That's a critical part of your mission! And it's everyone's job--not just the parents and teachers!

And what about the thousands of people in Cincinnati who are UU's but don't know it! Evangelize! Wake them up! That's also part of your mission!

And your leadership is on the case!  
Some of your Board's ambitious goals  
for this year and next include mission *discernment*,  
fostering a culture of innovation and risk-taking,  
considering the worship experience,  
including fuller integration of families  
and the wider community,  
and overhauling and updating  
your antiquated bylaws and constitution. (my words--not the board's.)

And you've got a Design Thinking group!  
Some of the issues they're working on include  
developing ideas  
for strengthening your sense of community  
to attract and retain members,  
looking at how worship  
can appeal to minds, hearts  
and diverse spiritual beliefs,

and how social justice  
is part of your church identity.  
And, of course, don't forget  
exciting ideas in *21st century Stewardship!*

It is said that it takes eight years for a congregation to recover from a major conflict--like the one you went through. So the timing will be great for your new minister.

On the cover of your OS you may have noticed that the largest word in the wordcloud is "Proud." It bodes well.

So next time, when Change says to the universe,  
*Hey, I'd like to happen now!*  
The Universe will reply with ease and joy,  
*That's terrific! Happen then!*  
And change will happen,  
a tiny sweet bud  
opening into a beautiful flower!

Well, probably not.  
But may you *meet the challenge,*  
*stretch your resources,*  
*examine what you are doing and change course;*  
*and redefine your problems as opportunities.*

May it be so. Amen.