



**Faith in Us**  
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I have a good friend who works part time at a world famous museum. Like many non-profits in the new millennium, this prestigious institution is struggling with funding, attendance, and maintenance. In response, management has tightened the belt, focused on the bottom line, fired some and hired some. It just hasn't helped. The old ways of doing business aren't working.

Recently my good friend had an idea. A small cog in a big wheel, she and a colleague hit on an idea to use a social media platform to enter and streamline museum information for any staff member. They have been building this site on their own and informing folks along the way.

She recently attended a meeting where she was informed her hours would be reduced, budget cuts you know. When she mentioned the platform she was working on, her supervisor didn't understand it, and her supervisor's supervisor had forgotten about it. She was also asked how many hours she was putting in on this project, at a whopping salary of \$10.00 an hour, her time could really be adding up.

This is not a mere review of life at The Office, or in Dilbert's cubicle - it is the face and fate of non-profits, whether they be museums, agencies, or congregations today. This story of my friend, is happening everywhere, even at First Church. And, I am convinced we are going to thrive in spite of ourselves because of people like my friend who passionately care about the mission of an organization, even when the organization itself is floundering, scared, and engaging in crazy talk. It will be the innovation of these unexpected people, routinely confounding higher management, that will help us find our way.

It is tough out there in the non-profit world. If you work in one, you know. If not, here are some basics, patterns of giving and attendance/affiliation have dramatically declined since the recession. Everything we were taught in school, out in the field, and in continuing education as recent as just a few years ago, is not working. NOT WORKING. For those of us in management, this is a tough time. We have not technical problems - blacktop the

driveway, change a light bulb, but adaptive ones - how do we program and fund for growth? We are floundering and scared.

Recently the UU produced a report entitled "The Economic Sustainability of Ministries Summit June 2015." Donations to religious organizations have fallen from 50% of charitable giving in 1956 to 30% in 2014. A recent Pew Study indicates that Unitarian Universalists are getting younger and less wealthy, so we have less money to give. As the report explains "Many [UU congregations] struggle to hold their own both in membership and finances. Even in growing congregations, finances are often insufficient to meet all desired goals including fair compensation for staff." This is certainly true at First Church.

Another study, American Congregations 2015: Thriving and Surviving, based on a survey of 4,436 congregations from a variety of denominations and religions indicates that "more than half of all American congregations [have] less than 100 people in attendance for their weekend worship service."

OK, problems, problems, problems. And opportunities abound.

I have faith in us. I do, I do.

In a recent New York Times Magazine (December 6, 2015) interview the Dalai Lama was quoted as saying "time change, they have to change. Therefore, Dalai Lama institution, I proudly, voluntarily, ended. So, it is backward . . . We voluntarily changed that. Why? If there is something good, then no need for change. Because it is outdated. As a Buddhist we must be realistic."

As Unitarian Universalists we must be realistic too. If the Dalai Lama can change himself and his role, so can we. The Dalai Lama does not say these words with fear or dread, and he is often considered the leader of 6 million people, as opposed to our 340 (including children). He does not say these words with carelessness or spite. He says them in reality. He is going to die and life will go on and people will find a way. In his time remaining, he hopes to clean some of his house to prepare that way for them.

We need to think of ourselves embarked on this same journey. Not to be pitied, not to live in fear, not to make ourselves smaller, but to live into the evolution of life. We are evolving. Congratulations! Oh rats, evolution hurts! There is loss, but it is till OK.

We are in what congregational consultant Susan Beaumont refers to as a "liminal season, threshold moments where the continuity of tradition is called into question, and uncertainty about the future throws us into doubt." Beaumont counsels that it is important to name and remain in the liminal season without prematurely getting out (which avoids the pain of true awareness and change) or freaking out. She counsels that congregations "get clear about the heart of their identity" and help members understand that "we are not being inactive, we are attending to the future." She further advises we be honest about our losses and try experiments.

Name a loss. (will start - used to always make our budget even during the Recession!)

Experiment you would like to try? (Alternative worship group meeting)

Another congregational consultant, Susan Nienaber, who has worked with us at First Church believes that congregations reach a "threshold of change" where they have just enough discomfort and incentive to try new things that will help them make a positive change. I think we have reached that place, and reached it early.

You might be alarmed by our "numbers" but in comparison to other UU congregations we are doing fine. We have problems, we know them, talk about them, and we have resources (membership, identity, and money). Yes we have money, as Jayson Zoller and I like to say "A congregation with a million dollar endowment does not have to go under." Think about that.

So let me tell you about the good side of our numbers. First, we are a large congregation. We have more than 100 people in attendance on Sunday morning. This means we have more people, program, money, and resource leverage. Second, compared to our UU peers, we are succeeding. You might not know that.

If you came to the congregational meeting last Sunday you know that we lost more members than we signed last year, so we are down to 276 members, which makes our growth flat in the last 9 years. In 2007 we had 275 members. This still looks good compared to our peer congregation.

It is always important to keep things in context. It is true, that if you looked at our membership in about 2011, it was over 310. We grew dramatically in a four year period and it was stressful for us. It was the highest membership we had had in over 30 years. It was so unusual that we had a congregational fight so that we could feel more normal again. Fight concluded, 25 people left, one problem solved, new ones developed. I sort of think it was the fight we needed to have and I am glad that we got in out of the system and learned a few things. And no one was "bad" in that fight. People were just scared and confused, deeply passionate about this congregation, worried about how to change well. Change is hard. I think we have learned to have compassion for ourselves and one another, which is going to help us as we move forward.

Here is another thing First Church has going for it, location.

Now, we would not have always said that. The city has morphed around us since we moved ourselves up Reading Road 127 years ago. There was light rail, the Sears building, the bus line, no light rail, apartments, empty buildings, no apartments, drug traffic, less drug traffic, business development. According to the American Congregations 2015, "Location is not destiny, but it helps." And all the sudden, without our effort, our locational destiny is changing. I71 was fast tracked to allow more access to the Uptown, which will improve traffic flow around us. The Sears Building, our empty neighbor for decades, is being renovated to be UC innovation space. There is talk of making Reading Road an innovation corridor. I don't care what side of the building you put the BLM sign on, as long as it can be seen from the street, more people will be coming by, and they will come inside.

And then, here is the very best part of all. I saved desert for last. What we know of our core

and mission, makes us unique, useful, invaluable, rare, and precious. According to the American Congregation study, congregations are becoming more conservative and less likely to focus on social justice. As the report notes "congregations that stick out from the crowd are more likely to be growing." As a recent WCPO article about congregations featured in the American Congregation 2015 study "First Unitarian's unique identity helps differentiate it from other churches, which seems to be important for growth as well. Of growing churches represented in the survey, 58% said they were very different from other congregations in their area." Yes, we were so unique, we were in the paper again!

I was interviewed for the article since I filled out a survey for the report, and of course I told them the truth, that "growth in numbers doesn't mean growth in revenue . . . Older members tend to give more than younger and for every older member who dies, the church needs several new young members to replace the older member's giving." If we just do a study on the old models of giving, it will look terrible, and we will need to up our Prozac, because we are in a liminal stage and do not yet know the new models of giving.

Oh yes, we have returned to innovation. At an Executive Meeting last week our Operations Manager, Carrie Spiess, mentioned that Canvass and Finance were exploring text giving. Sort of "text \$10 now if you like what you saw/heard/read." What a brilliant idea! Candidate Bernie Sanders has had great success doing this, as has National Public Radio. I regularly look on our Facebook page, and we get all sorts of comments and likes from people I don't know. Would some of them give to us because of our mission? Probably.

Friends, we have to work on clarifying our mission and the Board is exploring how to proceed. This is our not so secret weapon. Our mission is the reason I married GLBTQ couples for free the week after the Supreme Court Marriage Equality Decision. The first couple I married was transgender. How beautiful. Really, think of your ministry. How beautiful! Our mission is the reason I spent time on the phone with Afreen Asif from the ICGC talking about how our youth could tour the mosque, and if we could arrange a social gathering/mixer for pre-teens and parents in our congregations, because the Muslims often feel isolated. How cool would that be? And fun.

Our mission is the reason our Director of Family Programming, is leading parent groups to unite and support our parents and kids, evolving the program's focus from children to families. Our mission is the reason seven of us are going to an Intercultural Competency Workshop in Indianapolis in three weeks. Our mission is the reason we are exploring the "Freethinking Friends," a group of UU humanists who suggests we add "atheist" to our welcoming statement, and I agree! Our mission is the reason you still have time to fill out what your hopes for ministry in Avondale are in the coming year!

People, this is the good stuff! The great stuff! Our hurting, harming world needs this message of love, collaboration, resistance, acceptance, and hope! I have faith in us.

Later in this month a small group of us will be working with Design Impact Theory to see how we can use its principles to spur innovation and understanding at First Church. Design Theory or Process moves groups away from outdated, less productive hierarchical models of decision making, and toward visual, group process that encourages risk, speaking to learn, and tolerating failure, because that is how we learn best. We also have a First Church Futures

group working on data collection and possible marketing outreach. What we proposed was so innovative the UUA didn't know what we were talking about. Isn't that great? We also have the opportunity to partner with other UU congregations succeeding in areas where we need to learn more through the Leap of Faith program.

So what can you do to help, invite a friend to try First Church, to experience worship, watch a video, share a video, come to an event or class, like our Facebook page. Share what you like with who you know.

I want to close our sermon today with a video sent to me by the very friend who I told you about at the beginning of the sermon. She and her collaborator are convinced that at any moment their employer is going to pull the plug on their platform innovation because it is new, misunderstood, scary, unfamiliar, maybe genius, and costs a lot, billing out at \$10.00 an hour. And yet they continue in their development, convinced that they are on to something vital and lively, life-giving for the institution they believe in and love in the face of uncertainty and threat.

When they despair, they watch this recent video of a time and place under siege, and a people learning to go with the flow and try something new, to risk, to fall, to learn, and rise again. This is First Church.