

**Building Community Outside of These Walls
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship**

February 4, 2007

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens
can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

- *Margaret Mead*

We are all angels with one wing; we can only fly while embracing one another. - *Luciano de Crescanzo*

When I was an idealistic and passionate high schooler, I became involved with an organization called Young World Development. It was, as I remember it, a program of the Freedom from Hunger Foundation, which still exists to bring self-help solutions to the fight against chronic hunger and poverty. This was the early 70's, and we hippie-wannabes, who had missed it by a decade or so, organized 'hunger banquets' and worked to educate our community about the realities of hunger, particularly in developing countries. It was during this work that I first heard the Chinese proverb (here adapted) "Give a person a fish and che will eat for a day. Teach hir how to fish and hir family will eat for a lifetime."

We tend, I think, in hearing this proverb, to think of ourselves as the teachers – the ones who know how to fish and who have the resources to help someone else learn. While it is true that we have much to offer and to share, we might also take a less literal view. What do we need to be taught? What if the fish that we need for survival is a healthy vital interdependent community? There may be moments when we get a taste of this fish, but then it eludes us and we grow hungry for it again.

As a congregation, we've been focused of late on the work of the Way Forward Task Force and the strategic plan that has been accepted by the Board. As most of you know, that plan proposes that this congregation intentionally work toward both a settled full-time minister and a new building that better serves our needs and our values. We are just beginning to get into this monumental work. The next few months will be full of dialogue and education, and soon working groups will get started on accomplishing these ambitions. The prospects are both exciting and daunting, and it will be tempting to get carried away in the dreaming and scheming and to forget the

real work of this congregation. A full-time minister and a new building are simply tools to help us do our work, but they are not the work itself. Let's not forget that.

I'm also aware that we hold limited, albeit abundant, resources. We can't do everything at once, and many times I have reminded myself of the wise words of Suzanne Hansen, our congregational president. At the beginning of her term, she vowed to concentrate on a few things and to do them well, rather than trying to do everything. This is sage advice indeed.

And so today I come to you with a seed...I'm just putting a little something in your pipe to smoke...adding a little fodder to the mill...giving you a little bait to put on your fish hook. I encourage you to let it germinate or brew or develop in its own time. Sometimes the most important things take time to develop roots. So take this seed and nurture it - let ideas and possibilities grow out of it.

The topic for today's message, building community outside of these walls, was inspired by events and conversations in the recent life of this congregation. As you know, we have voted to devote a share of our pledged income to support local and global causes. A system for determining exactly how and to what organizations that money will be given is yet to be put into place. Some have felt that this process could become divisive, but I see it as a great opportunity to have a group conversation about what is most important to us. What organizations or causes best match our values and implement projects that we want to support? There are many more worthwhile causes than we have dollars, and the discernment process promises to be one that both educates us and binds us in community.

Here's a seed that's been germinating in me. Those of you have had read our strategic plan in detail know that the Way Forward Task Force decided to take the position of not taking a position on growth. This is not to say that they believe we shouldn't grow, or that growth isn't important. But, it was the collective wisdom of the task force that to count on projections about growth was ill advised. We are what we have now. We need to move forward on our own two, that is 240, very present feet.

Even so, I happen to believe that full-time ministry and an accessible, welcoming building will contribute to the growth of this congregation. So, paying little heed to the Way Forward Task Force, I've found myself studying what makes churches grow. A recent study by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research found that congregations that experience growth are those that are clear about why they exist and what they should be doing. (That study also found other interesting data - like that growing churches use contemporary styles of worship, have a website, and involve children in worship....I have a copy of that report if you'd like to read more.)

And last week, there was a conversation on the UU Ministers' chat about growth... specifically about the differences in mission when comparing small and large congregations. The general consensus is that small churches are more often internally focused - on being a safe haven for the religiously marginalized - and see themselves as the only liberal game in town. Large churches, in contrast, are generally externally focused - and see themselves as active participants in the transformation of community and culture. Members of small churches think about their church as a place that needs them. Members of large churches believe that the world needs their church. So if you're a believer in the adage that 'if you build it they will come,' a challenge for us, as a small church is to begin to see ourselves, as a religious community, as agents of transformation.

But don't let's get trapped into thinking that growth is just about numbers. There are many ways in which we might grow, or better put, be more fully healthy and vital. One of those is "incarnational growth,"¹ that is, our capacity to make a difference in the world. It involves how we embody our message and how we live our values in our specific context, in Thunder Bay. Incarnational growth requires that we are able to both build a religious community in which we can deepen our faith, and send ourselves out to really engage in the world. So maybe we need both a big and a small mentality...a nurturing community and an outward vision. A clear sense of vision and mission are critically important to our vitality - we need to stay focused on why it is that Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship exists.

¹ Mead, Loren, *More Than Numbers: The Ways Congregations Grow*

This community, like so many Unitarian Universalist congregations, is pretty good at creating a nurturing environment. Most of you would probably say that the reason you attend is because of the caring community you find here. While we can always improve on that, and while we will always need to create space for newcomers, I think we've got that inward focus thing covered. So now we need to think about the external focus thing. How are we going to do that?

We could start with behaving as a 'we.' One reason that factored into the decision to give away a portion of our income is a belief in the special power of collective action. Working together to further our mission deepens our commitment to this community, enriches our relationships with one another, and might even be transformational in our individual growth. Great accomplishments are rarely the work of a single individual. It takes a village to do just about anything! In addition to the value collective action adds to our lives, working together as a group is a huge contributing factor in our visibility in the community, and in showing the world what we stand for. We have good news to share - the good news of religious freedom and human potential.

As you heard last week from Mary Bennett, Unitarians are often described as a herd of cats or as a wheelbarrow full of frogs, and unfortunately, not as a group of folks who take collective action. We're not really all that great at being a group. Warren Bennis, the chairman of the Leadership Institute at the University of Southern California, has written extensively about great groups.² He has studied some of the most noteworthy 'great groups' of our time - groups like the Manhattan Project, Xerox's Research Center, Apple Computer, and Disney Animators - and suggests that there are principles that are common to all of these groups. Great groups, Bennis says, share a dream. They manage conflict by abandoning individual egos to the pursuit of that dream. They have a real or invented enemy, and do not regard the mainstream as the sacred Ganges. Great groups view themselves as winning underdogs and are willing to

² Bennis, Warren, "The Secrets of Great Groups" Leader to Leader, No. 3 Winter 1997

pay a personal price to win. They don't recognize what's supposed to be impossible, and they produce a tangible outcome external to themselves.

I hope that you see us in that list. We definitely have the potential to be a great group. We do share a dream - a dream of a world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. We share a common enemy - the structures and systems that perpetuate injustice and violence. And, we have shining examples, here within this congregation, of those who are willing to pay a price to work toward our dream, even if it means abandoning their personal egos. Today's service leader, Bob Manson, is one of those people.

If Bennis is right, in order to be a great group, we need to be able to have something to show for our efforts. What might you be really proud to say that this group has accomplished? In what common purpose and work could we unite?

It was Jean Morrison, I believe, who, during the conversation on charitable giving, encouraged us not to slip into a certain self-righteousness in giving our money away. This isn't enough; we also need to take tangible action toward making a difference. Values and principles mean very little if they are not supported by our works...by actually living our values. I would also suggest that an outgrowth, or natural progression, from the process of discerning where to give this money is to then figure out how else to really make a difference, as a great group.

So now comes the part where I feel almost totally inadequate to speak...that is, what can we do in Thunder Bay. I've been in town for just 17 months, and frankly, because I've known it to be a brief sojourn, and because my contract with you discouraged it, I haven't engaged too much with community issues. That's no excuse, I admit, because it is always important to grow where you're planted...however temporarily. I must believe that we can always make a difference, no matter how small or brief the effort. And so, in order to speak with even a modicum of authority on this topic, I asked a lot of questions and spoke to a lot of people. You will most certainly have other ideas and more informed viewpoints, and I hope that you will share them during the time for dialogue.

What I found cuts across four areas...the economy, the environment, education, and the changing demographics of the area. I tried to think about the issues that were raised in terms of those that were immediate needs, and those issues that are structural and institutional. I did this because when (and I say when, not if) this congregation takes on a group project, part of the discernment process will be whether to provide fish, or to give fishing lessons.

On the latter, the structural issues, I found four broad hungers of note, which I list briefly:

- The need for regional control over decisions that directly affect the people of Northwestern Ontario, control that could positively affect the economic future of the region;
- A need for a collective vision on the part of the City Council of Thunder Bay that would enable them to work together and to take real action to make Thunder Bay a vital community;
- Increased awareness of our interdependence as a whole people, which would in turn encourage understanding of our different racial and economic contexts, and allow us to support and care for one another as a community; and
- Education about and intentional action to correct the impending environmental crisis...here, particularly as it relates to Lake Superior and forestry.

As to the former, the obstacles to basic daily needs, the list is much longer. It includes:

- Unemployment and the resulting poverty levels that leave folks without adequate food and housing;
- Ageism and the resulting, often hidden, abuse of the elders;
- Crimes and violence enacted upon one another – particularly evident in violence against and the murder of women;
- Quality education for all ages – the need for effective teaching and learning that not only gives our young people the skills they need for

jobs, but also teaches them to think and to contribute to the enrichment of the culture; and

- A lack of sincere dialogue between the native and non-native populations, which leads to increased racism and a deepening chasm between us.

The list could go on and on. I'm sure you've already mentally added many things to it.

A few years ago, while studying Spanish in South Central Los Angeles, I visited a business that had been started by a Jesuit priest. It's called Homeboys Industries and was begun as a small bakery that gave jobs to gang members. In 2005, the organization offered more than 4,000 tattoo removal treatments, 1,000 mental health counselling sessions and nearly 1,000 job placements to youth working for Homeboy businesses or in outside jobs. Father Greg Boyle saw a problem...youth who were trapped in a system where they could not find jobs ...and answered it by finding a way to provide jobs to those who were willing to make a commitment to a new life.

Just a few weeks ago, I heard of a UU church in Maine who, about a year ago, started a 'non-food' pantry called the Corner Cupboard. What started out as a good deed has emerged into a full-blown social justice program. They now serve people in more than 20 towns. They have received a little bit of grant money, and while they are constantly searching for other ways to bring in revenue, the project has been wildly successful for all those who are involved.

Other churches have provided training programs for those who assist the elderly and homebound, launched tutoring projects, set up programs that allow children to visit their parents in jail, sponsored refugee families, provided email accounts and mailing addresses for the homeless, set up job-matching programs, helped immigrants deal with public agencies, etc, etc, etc. The possibilities are endless.

What I'm suggesting to you today is that such a collective action would be highly beneficial both to this congregation and to the city in which we live and work. The process would include identifying an issue, finding creative ways to address it that align with our values, and then taking action to make a difference. As I said earlier,

today I am simply planting this seed in you. Some day soon, and maybe growing out of our decision to give away a portion of our money, this congregation could be involved in meaningful and collective action that will change our world.

Think about it. Cast a line of imagination and see if you get any nibbles. As you hold this in your hearts, remember that the metaphor of giving a fish or teaching someone else to fish is too simplistic. As I alluded to when I began today, sometimes we are the hungry ones, and sometimes we are the uneducated. Sometimes we are the tools that make fishing possible, and sometimes we are the fish itself. Figuring out how to make it all work together, so that no one is hungry, that's the mission of this church.

What's unclear to me is whether or not, in our quest to be a great group, we really believe that we can be the winning underdogs and if we are truly convinced that attaining our dream is possible. When I was sixteen, I honestly believed that we could end world hunger. Somehow, in the process of working toward that dream I hit a wall, I became disillusioned, and really sort of gave up. I lost my faith.

But now, I simply have to believe that we can change the world. As Margaret Mead said, small groups of committed people are the only things that ever have, and believing anything else will not contribute to a meaningful life. Yet simply believing won't make it so. May we find the will and the passion to make a difference. And most of all, may we find each other so that, together, we might fly.

May it be so. Amen.