

WHOLE CHURCH
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship
January 15, 2006
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I don't think I would be overstating the case to say that there is not a lot of love lost in this room for U.S. President George W. Bush. So, I hope that I offend no one by telling of a grass roots campaign that sprang up across the States during the last election. Groups of activists, under the banner of "Billionaires for Bush", showed up at rallies, conventions, town hall meetings... dressed in tuxedos and evening gowns ...making it clear that a certain contingent, the very wealthy, support Bush because his fiscal policies work to their advantage. These 'billionaires' are tongue-in-cheek supporters of 'tickle-up economics', and have dubbed Dubaya as their own "Robbing the Hood."

While this campaign is obviously a spoof, it contains very serious subject matter. "Billionaires for Bush," beneath their sarcasm, have a vision of a country in which, truly, no child is left behind, no program to care for the nation's most marginalized is jeopardized in favor of supporting big business, no particular religious perspective is allowed to set the national agenda, and no amount of money can sway decisions that should be made in the best interest of the people, all of the people. This is, of course, a vision of an ideal...something to work toward. At least from my perspective, this is a picture of democracy creating a beloved community, in which humanitarianism, social responsibility, and morality reign supreme.

Similarly, we as a religious community have a dream. We have a dream of a world somehow better than the one we know today. And we have some pretty clear thoughts about what that world would look like. Our UU principles spell it out...it's a world where each person is presumed to have inherent worth and dignity, a world where we encourage one another toward growth, a world where we use a democratic process to make decisions, where we hold in front of us the vision of a peaceful planet, a world where we are fully aware of how we 'interbe'

with everything. A religious community, this religious community, can be a testing ground, a laboratory where we practice our faith and the living of our ideals.

Some would say that the true measure of any organization, any community, is how well it takes care of its own people. So to measure LUF, we have to ask if we care for all of our people. When we make a decision, whose voice is unheard? Who is left out because of the inaccessibility of our space? Who cannot attend worship services because of their commitments to the RE program? I hesitate to say it, but when we make choices or perpetuate systems that suit our individual needs without regard for the whole community, we have a myopic perspective not unlike the real life 'Billionaires for Bush'.

A few days ago, a group of very committed individuals, our pod leaders, our mother whales, got together to see if the pod system has been successful at orchestrating volunteerism for Sunday morning tasks. A comment was made that it is difficult to get people to do the 'RE cleanup' job, not because it's difficult, (actually the pod leaders see it as the easiest one on the list.) Instead, it was suggested that it is difficult to find volunteers because the 'upstairs people' ...and that was the exact phrase used...the 'upstairs people' don't venture into the basement and don't see a job connected with the RE program as within their reality or obligation.

Linda Thomson, Director of Regional Services for the CUC - East, talks about this very fragmentation in a recent article. She gives examples of congregational newsletters with Religious Education columns with such titles as "A View from Above" or "News from Downstairs". She wonders what it would look like if there were no upstairs and downstairs distinction. It certainly makes you have to think outside of the box, and it would maybe mean that Sunday Services, as we know them, would have to change. It means building an intentional multi-generational community in which children, youth, and adults at all stages of life would ponder, learn and participate together. Linda is part of a movement underfoot in some UU

circles that promotes the concept of 'Whole Church' as their way of describing such a beloved community.

While 'Whole Church' has been used primarily as a vision of a truly multigenerational church, for me, this vision of 'Whole Church' goes beyond the blending of age groups. What if 'whole church' meant that we were inclusive of diverse theologies, differing physical abilities, and a full range of social and intellectual classes?...and multigenerational in a truly integrative way? At the very least, to be committed to the goal of Whole Church would be to ask "Who is affected by this?" and "Who is being left out?" when assessing our programming, and before making any decisions or taking action.

An interesting perspective is shared by one American youth, who wrote about the sure steps to denominational death. She points out that first we separate and isolate our children from the life of the congregation, telling them that they are special and have special needs that require them to have separate gatherings. Then, we foster disaffection, by discouraging them from interaction with the whole church, and encouraging them to concentrate only on themselves. Finally, when we have nurtured this separation to the nth degree, when they have grown into disinterested and detached youth, we tell them we no longer have space or time for them. With some distain, or pain, she then names this plan for denominational death, calling it YRUU.¹ So maybe it's a mistake to talk about children representing the future of the church, because that may foster an attitude that they are not an important part of our present as a whole community. We tend to push them to the periphery, and consistently relegate them to the least desirable space in the building. I've heard one report, at LUF, of some sustained bitterness because of the way we treat the YRUU...a perceived, if unspoken, understanding that their space needs come last.

¹ Meg Muckenhoupt, "How to Kill a Religion," *Ferment: A Publication of the UU Young Adult/Campus Ministry Office* (Issue 13, January 2000), 6. (As quoted in "Belonging: The Meaning of Membership", a report of the UUA Commission on Appraisal, 2001)

Fox Valley UU Fellowship is one of the fastest growing UU churches in the States. Several years ago, when making plans to build a new church, they were faced with tough decisions because available funds would not allow them to build the church they really wanted. But you know what they decided? Instead of building a fancy sanctuary, they put their money into a spacious, functional, welcoming religious education building. And they built a simple, small sanctuary...something that could later be used as a fellowship hall or chapel...with plans to build a bigger sanctuary in the future, when funds allow. I'm sure this wasn't an easy decision... the church has over 500 members, and the small chapel holds barely 150. This means that they must have three services each weekend...one on Saturday night, and two on Sunday mornings. Their big focus is on the religious education program, and the main RE program is run in conjunction with the Saturday service. I don't think you could find a person at Fox Valley who would not attribute their growth to this intentional decision to put the children first.

At Cedar Lane Unitarian Church in Bethesda, Maryland, out of a discussion group that was exploring the role of the church's education program, the idea of making the worship service and the religious education program open to all began to percolate.² Their major premise was that old patterns of worship and Sunday School are no longer relevant. Cedar Lane wanted their church to be a forum, providing the environment within which the questions of the day could be posed, explored, wrestled with, and acted upon, as a whole community. It took a lot of re-imagining and work, but now, each spring, for a period of five to eight weeks, they break down the paradigm of age separation. One worship service is held, but simultaneously, multiple other groups are meeting, each with a different focus. The worship service and each focus group is open to anyone, of any age, who wants to attend. They call it their Spring B... an opportunity to "be" or to "become" ... a dancer, a woodworker, a hiker, a discussant ... to participate and to learn...a community within which they imagine, talk, sing, create, and work together. A whole.

² http://www.uua.org/families/intergenerational/spring_b.html or <http://www.cedarlane.org/springB.html>

So, as far as I know, there is no 'one way' to do 'whole church'. What would this 'whole church', this 'better world' look like if it were a reality right here at LUF? I can't predict its exact manifestation...that's up to all of us. We start with what we have...all of you...and all of our children. We start with the great resource that is your willingness to re-think things, to imagine how we could do it better, and to challenge ourselves to greater love and service. Perhaps we start small...with awareness. Perhaps we start big...with an initiative to make a primary commitment to a truly intergenerational community. At least within our current programming configuration, it certainly means that more 'upstairs' people should occasionally go 'downstairs'. Today you're being offered two tangible ways to take action...to become a Mystery Pal for one of the children (there's information on an insert in your Order of Service) and/or to attend the lunch meeting after the service to learn more about, and perhaps even to volunteer to help with, the religious education program here at LUF. These things are a start...Real, make-a-difference, hands-on ways to achieve 'whole church'.

I've been wondering, though, if there is some connection between our commitment to this place and our own sense of wholeness, both within ourselves and as members here. You may be feeling, even as one of the 'upstairs people', that you're one of the 'left out', at least in some aspects of the life of this fellowship, and that can't possibly feel good. I suppose we are more likely to reach out, to include others, to make more space in our lives for this work, when we feel positive about it. The conundrum is, that becoming a more whole community is exactly what will generate more good will and positive energy. We have to act whole in order to feel whole.

Action, participation, commitment...all of this is necessary. Membership here is voluntary, but our theology of membership, the way we understand what it means to belong, must address both the benefits and the obligations of this freely chosen religious association.³ I

³ Belonging: The Meaning of Membership, A Report by the Commission on Appraisal (UUA: Boston, June 2001), 20.

believe that one of the huge benefits of membership is access to an embodied relational theology... a theology that understands human relationships, especially with those who are different than us, to be of ultimate concern and meaning.⁴ Miz B spoke of this in her column in January's newsletter...that religious education, for all of us, is grounded in our relationships. You don't need a church to believe what you want, or to think for yourself. You need a church in order to be in relationship with others.⁵ The ability to grow through our relationships with each member of this community, young and old, is a precious spiritual gift, because making connections is the essence of our religious experience.⁶

Part and parcel with benefits come responsibilities. Membership comes with obligations. Real community can only be built through hard and sometimes unglamorous work. Part of the church's job is to lead people to the discovery of the spiritual truth that it is only by giving that we receive... that it is only by making a commitment to a community that we can hope to build a whole community.⁷

We talk a lot about how we want to grow. But growth comes in many ways⁸ ...we can grow numerically. We can experience maturational growth...learning, deepening. Growth also happens organically, when our systems and programs adapt to the changing needs of the whole. And growth can be incarnational, that is, when we are able to put what we believe into practice, when we live what we believe in transformational ways. If we want to achieve 'whole church', this will require incarnational growth... challenging ourselves to put our commitments behind our beliefs.

It's sort of hard for me to look out onto your faces and to talk about commitment and obligation. You are giving so much, working so hard, daily, to build this church into the beloved

⁴ Ibid, 21

⁵ Ibid, 29

⁶ Ibid, 2

⁷ Ibid, 9

⁸ Ibid, 39

community. I'm afraid that many of you feel unappreciated or that your contribution is taken for granted. I know that some feel that they are doing more than their fair share, and that a seed of bitterness grows within them...not because they regret what they are doing, but because they can't help but notice that others are not giving to the same degree. Unfortunately, this is a hard reality that we must accept...acknowledging our differences in all areas is part of the vision of 'whole church.' Just like some have more money than others, some have more dedication than others, some have more time than others, some have more energy than others. The pod leaders tell me that there are those who feel they should not be called upon to do the pod jobs, and that there are some who feel they're being asked too often. We each have the right to say no when asked to help. That's the way it is, and we must trust that each of us contributes to this fellowship in the ways they are able.

Here are some soft facts, some estimates, of what we need to operate this place. We have, to my count, about 14 committees, each of which does good and necessary work. With an average of five people on each and one meeting per committee per month, each for about 2 hours, that's 150 committee hours per month. We have three religious education classes, which ideally should each have two teachers, and with prep time, that's another 75 hours per month. We have six pod jobs that need to be done each week, which maybe average about an hour apiece, and that adds 25 hours. So, without taking into account all the special and additional ways that people take care of this place, and the committee work that happens outside of the committee time, especially by the committee chairs, and the contributions many make toward fund-raising and lifespan learning and pod management... without taking into account all of this, we have at least 250 hours of need each month. Right now we have somewhere between 110-120 members, but based on the pod leaders' reports, only about 60 people actively participate, whether by choice or by ability.

I don't know how to say what's fair...I'm actually quite sure that what's fair doesn't matter...but the numbers alone would indicate that an equitable share for each active member, at

minimum, is 4-5 hours of volunteering here each month. That could translate into some combination of being on one committee, teaching at least one RE class, and doing at least one pod job EACH MONTH. (And I'm here to tell you that a month goes by pretty quickly!) While I would never suggest that we prescribe obligation as part of membership, we should at least be aware of what it takes to make this place tick. We should also notice, and be intentionally grateful to, those who put in countless more hours than this 'minimum' each month. Those people may be doing the fair share of several people...not because they are martyrs or masochists, but because they can, because they choose to, because they believe in the possibility.

Even though I have strong Swedish genes, and hard work, even martyrdom, can feel good to me, I refuse to believe that the hard work of incarnation and transformation is work that is to be seen as an obligation or a duty. It should feel good! Transformation is a goal, the 'whole church' is a vision, that might inspire us to participate as fully as we can because we want to be part of this alive and dynamic organism we call Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship. This is what we love. In the midst of the most grueling committee meeting, in the frustration of being the only one to show up for a work project, in the disappointment of a 'perceived' failed RE lesson, we must remember why we are here, touch the commitment in our hearts, and resolve to keep trying. With joy. With each other.

It is fitting that tomorrow is Martin Luther King Jr Day in the States, a day that honors that great prophet who spoke so eloquently of a dream of the beloved community. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke from a context of segregation and legalized discrimination; he lived in a time in that culture when peoples were routinely separated based on the color of their skin; a time when lines of inside and outside were clearly drawn. It was the injustice of those defining lines that he fought so hard to erase. Dr. King had a dream, a dream of a beloved community, a community where each person is included and honored.

And today I talk about a dream of a 'whole church'... a church without segregation in terms of age, or ability, or upstairs/downstairs. A whole church is multi-generational, inclusive, respectful of all, connective. It notices who is being left out. It is not divided or disjointed. It understands that we are inextricably interconnected, and that injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere. It shares its joys and sorrows and responsibilities. To become a 'whole church' requires increased awareness, but it will also take active participation... an incarnational perspective on membership...an understanding that it is through participation in this dynamic, spiritual body that we can transform an agglomeration of individuals into a beloved community⁹... a 'whole church'.

I promise you...It will feel so good!

⁹ Ibid, 9