

Now What?

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Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

When your search committee and I were in conversation about me coming here as consulting minister the committee asked my thoughts about accomplishing the work of the church with a declining or over-worked volunteer base, about growing your membership, and about the future existence and direction of your church. I have no doubt the questions were heart felt, asked with a deep longing for answers, even, perhaps, with an unspoken prayer that somewhere in my answers would be the one. The one answer that would calm all the fears and clearly point the way forward. I answered from my heart and from my experience with other small Unitarian Universalist congregations and from my limited knowledge at that point of this small Unitarian Universalist congregation. And there must have been something in my reply that reassured or challenged or sparked hope in Sheldon and Sally and Julie, for they recommended to the Board that I be offered the position of consulting minister.

What I don't remember that committee asking was much about my personal style or approach to congregational ministry--though perhaps they heard about it from my references. If they did, they probably heard that I'm not much of new broom sweeps clean kind of a minister. I have a gradual approach of listening and observing and watching processes unfold. I will state my opinion, divulge my experience and my knowledge when asked by a Board or a committee--and I will absolutely offer my unsolicited opinion pro-actively, in strong words if necessary, when my listening and observing and watching reveal destructive or counter-productive or otherwise harmful actions, attitudes and directions. I'll call in outside consultants when I think an expert or neutral perspective is needed. And, when I believe I have a good sense of history, current trends, and congregational needs and desires, I'll launch new initiatives or make changes in existing traditions or programs.

It is a leadership style that works for me. But it can be mistaken for a lack of engagement, a lack of vision or even a lack of leadership. So it is helpful to clearly state it once in a while.

I've been here at Nora Church for four months now, and while my information-gathering undertaking is by no means complete, the first sermon of the new year seems a good time to reflect on some of what I've heard and observed and watched so far.

Here's what I've noticed:

You are, by and large, a happy congregation. You like being together and you love this church. You are eager to laugh at yourselves and one another and to tell stories of the long life of the congregation. You are also deeply anxious about the future of your church. Though no one has said so directly, I believe you either remember from personal experience the days these pews were filled to near capacity or you look at

those photographs hanging in the hall way, and you are saddened by the contrast to the small numbers that gather today.

Your happiness and love are evidenced in many ways--the stories you tell about long ago ministers and members as if they happened yesterday, your gentle teasing and laughing with one another, the pick-up lunches you've started having on non-potluck Sundays because the Hanska restaurant is closed but you still want to eat together, the calls you make to me to make sure I know the latest news of members and friends.

Your anxiety also shows itself in many ways--from an insistence on keeping a full-time, resident minister, to general dismay when the newspaper ad isn't complete to the attention paid to keeping the church website up-to-date and as accurate as possible--and of course, your straightforward questions, comments and observations about religious education, Sunday attendance and the number of volunteers doing the bulk of the work.

Along with your love and your concern I've noticed something else: you tend to be too hard on yourselves. Don't be mistaken. I am all for excellence in every aspect of church life--worship, communication, publicity, social justice, stewardship, religious education, adult programming. I would not suggest that this or any congregation slack off on one area or another because it isn't important or doesn't matter or, heaven forbid, is too difficult. One of the ways we demonstrate our love, our commitment, and our pride in an institution is through striving for excellence in all that we do.

And yet, I repeat, you are a bit hard on yourselves.

I understand your nostalgia for the glory days of yore, the prosperity and the booming numbers. I understand even more your conviction that you have something special here and your desire to share that something special with as many people as possible. But here's the bad news--or is it the good news?--there is nothing very unique about this situation you find yourselves in. Mainline Protestantism is on the decline in America. The rural church is on the decline in America. My father's childhood Methodist church in western Minnesota has been part of a three-point charge for as long as I can remember. Closer to home, my Lutheran colleagues Aaron and Mary serve a four-point charge. Oh, it's been given a single name, Prairie Land Lutheran Parish, but it is four congregations, with four histories, four locations, four annual meetings. New Ulm United Church of Christ is in the very early stages of discussing yoking with its sister congregation in Gaylord. You are not alone. And nothing about your current situation, with regard to church membership, Sunday attendance, impact on the community or stewardship, calls for you to beat yourselves up.

Word was going around this fall that some of you think all of you need to be taken to task for one thing or another--not showing up in greater numbers, not having Sunday school in hand, whatever. But here's the thing: taking people to task is rarely effective, and even then is only effective if used rarely, in extreme cases. Most of the time what

works, consistently, with pets, with children, with adults, with congregations, is positive reinforcement and finding a spark.

Peter Morales, the new president of the UUA, talks about transforming Unitarian Universalism into a religion for our time. I'm certain we can anticipate bold ideas, provocative challenges and perhaps resources to support them. But Peter Morales doesn't have a silver bullet. There isn't a silver bullet. There are good ideas and general best practices. We should be open to ideas and we should follow best practices. We should also let go of the hope that there is one idea, one practice, one programs, one strategy, one UUA president, one parish minister that will turn it all around, triple attendance, double pledges, make headlines, restore peace, inspire justice and so on.

No silver bullet, no sure-fire program, certainly no super-hero in clergy robes. Instead we have only these two things:

The ability to step off the road into a new direction when the old one is getting us nowhere fast. And the knowledge, the absolute heart-felt conviction that the Messiah is one of us.

Now that I've been here awhile. Now that Smorgasbord has come and gone for another year. Now that the harvest is in and the holidays are fading, the Board and the committees and I--that means pretty much all of us--will turn our attention to specific areas of concern and specific areas of possibility. We'll review the work you did with Lyn Burton a while back and perhaps have a belated start-up session with a consultant from the district. We will renew our collective commitment to excellence in all that we do. And above all we'll watch for opportunities to step off into new and untried direction and pray for the courage to take them. And we will honor and celebrate the presence of the Messiah among us.

Yes, I know that language is troublesome. I'll deal with that in just a moment.

First though, from your very origins, you have a proven record of stepping off the path into new directions. Breaking away from the Lutheran Church, calling Kristofer Jansen, building Union Hall, giving Union Hall to the city, yoking with Mankato and then returning to full time ministry, UU and You programs in New Ulm, the current exploration of alternative energy source. You have a good eye and a willing spirit for trying new things. As we go forward together that adventurous spirit will serve Nora Church well. We won't embrace every new idea or indulge every whim, but we'll keep our eyes and our ears and our hearts open that which might, in new ways, call us back and deepen our core essence.

And all the while, even as we try new things, we will remember that what matters most is that the Messiah is one of us, already. Let me be clear. I don't mean that literally. I don't mean one of you is divinely ordained to save the world. I do mean that each of you is unique and precious, with saving gifts and talents to offer Nora and the world. I

do mean that already within this existing congregation lies the possibility of all that you dream of being. I do mean the answer to your questions about the future is to be found among you--not in me or the next minister you call. Not in programs of the district or the UUA. Not in the latest and best trends. But here, now.

I am with you primarily as a reminder of that reality. You, your families, your neighbors, have been the living spirit and the driving creative force of Nora Free Church for nearly one hundred and thirty years. You've done a fine job and will continue to do so. I believe in you. I trust your instincts and your dreams, your traditions and your wild ideas. The Messiah is one of you.

So, now, what? Now we go on as we have been. Rededicated to living, celebrating and spreading the message of a free and liberal faith here on the prairie. Secure in the knowledge that it is a life giving message, a life saving message and the world is hungry for it. Amen.