

Now What?

the Rev. Lisa Doege

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Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

Well, now what?

Almost a year ago, following years of declining membership and deficit budgets, given three options—to reduce spending for professional ministry to 50% of current levels, or reduce spending for professional ministry at 75% of current levels or maintain spending for professional ministry at a level that supports fulltime ministry, this congregation voted to continue funding full-time professional ministry. The vote was not unanimous, but neither was it particularly close. Because the vote followed several months of forthright discussions, I feel confident that you understood when you voted that unless pledge income increased substantially deficit spending would continue and our reserves would continue to dwindle.

In the days and weeks following that vote some members and friends chose to leave Nora Church. We still feel the hole their absence left in our community. Nevertheless, church life has continued on. Weather permitting we worshiped together on Sunday mornings. We ate together at potlucks and Lunch Bunch and Supper Club. We carried on tradition while serving the community at Smorg. The combined Nora church and Mankato Fellowship choirs enjoyed another year of raising voices and building relationships in song. We buried a beloved church member who had been at church the morning of the very day he suffered the stroke that would prove fatal. In coming months a couple more people with ties to our congregation who died in more distant places will be buried in family plots on our hill.

It's true that the few of us who walked in the Holiday Lights parade last November, and the even smaller handful of people who created our float, decided that that was our final Holiday Lights hurrah. Still, under Jeanie's continued presidential leadership we started two new programs this year. The Winter Solstice event at Flandrau State Park was so well attended by Nora folk and folks from the wider community that we've scheduled a Summer Solstice event (and I continue to advocate adding Spring and Fall Equinox

events, too). Our Community Dinners at the old Union Hall in Hanska got off to a slower start—but have been much enjoyed by those who have attended. With a few tweaks to the menu and continued improvements in publicity we anticipate growing crowds when we start up again in the fall. The laughter, reminiscing, and exchange of news at this past Wednesday’s dinner told us without a doubt that our goal of nourishing spirits and feeding bodies was met one hundred percent.

Washed out driveway, snowstorms, windstorms, death, deficit budget, small Sunday morning congregations and all, church life has carried on since that vote at our last annual meeting.

Something else has been happening in these past eleven months, too: just about the time we were voting on the future of ministry at Nora Church, an opportunity to come to us unexpectedly but not really out of the blue. Searching the Internet for Historic Nordic Churches in the Upper Midwest, the folks at Partners for Sacred Places came across our website and liked the looks of us. **Really** liked the looks of us. They wrote to us, and when that communication didn’t reach us, they called us to urge us to apply a grant program. They pretty much assured us we were a shoe-in, even in that first phone call. Both Jeanie and I were, I think, a little wary of their motives—never having heard of the organization, and knowing that things that sound too good to be true usually are. But I called around, and we both checked out their website and decided they were legit. You know the rest of the story.

We submitted an initial proposal. Jeanie and Colleen and Julie Peck went to a training session. We identified a project that met grant guidelines. Jeanie and Darrell and others crunched numbers and sought bids. A Partners for Sacred Places staff member made a site visit—during which we had a great conversation with three representatives from our surrounding community (Ashley Aukes of Bridging Brown County, Kathleen Backer of the Brown County Historical Society, and Jo Anne Taylor of First United Methodist and NUMAS Haus). And we ultimately received a matching grant of \$13,000 to make repairs to our belfry.

Almost immediately three or four families in the church quietly and generously offered to make sure we’d meet the match, if we failed to reach \$13,000 from other givers. In mid-December we sent a letter to all members of Nora Church and many other people with connections to our congregation, describing the Historic Nordic Churches grant

and inviting contributions. Earlier this month we sent a second letter to a smaller group of people, most of whom have relatives buried in Mt. Pisquah Cemetery.

To date fifty-five individuals, couples or families have donated just over \$25,000 to our Belfry Appeal—almost double what we needed to make the match and receive the \$13,000 Historic Nordic Churches grant. I will speak for myself, though I believe the board shares my feeling, when I say I am surprised yet not very surprised by depth and breadth of generosity and connection and love these donations stand for.

Some folks responded to our letters because they grew up at Nora Church or raised their children here; others responded because someone they love is a member here or the minister here; others responded because they have loved ones on the hill or have done genealogy work among the graves; still others read an article about the grant in the New Ulm Journal and donated to our appeal in honor of friends who are members here--- they sent glowing notes along with their checks to tell us about their friends and how much they love and admire them! And 18 of those 55 donors gave money to the appeal because they are current, active members of Nora Church.

Eighteen. That is to say, about one-third of the donors are current active members. And just slightly over one-third of our current active members donated to the appeal, including two of the families that had initially offered to make sure we met the match.

As soon as the weather improves work should begin on the belfry, helping to ensure that this historic Nordic church building weathers another 138 years. This achievement - \$25,000 and 55 donors - deserves unequivocal celebration.

And...and I would be remiss as your minister if I didn't say aloud and from this pulpit, the question of whether and how this historic Nordic church congregation exists and flourishes and serves our community for another 138 years or even eight years looms large in my mind, and the minds of Nora board members, and no doubt in your minds, too. More, that question dwells unsettlingly in my heart, and probably your heart, too.

We knew when we voted last June that our reserves would continue to dwindle; yet seeing the figures on the financial report month after month has taken a toll on your board of trustees. The board voted last month to ask, at this June's annual meeting, for you to again vote on the amount of professional ministry you want to responsibly fund

after next church year. And the month before last the board voted to ask me to soft-pedal this year's pledge drive sermon.

You see, they are all members of the church themselves, these board members, and they feel stretched to the limit of their own financial support to the church. Remembering recent asks for new roofs and furnaces, and because they stuffed and addresses the envelopes of the appeal letter and have written the thank you notes, they also feel that church has perhaps asked too often for too much money. They don't want to fatigue you by asking for substantial increases in your giving. So they want me to make a soft ask this year.

These church members, your board members, also don't want to be fiscally irresponsible with the money you have already given. They know there is no way to offer a balanced 2019/2020 church budget for your approval in June—no way, that is, short of letting me go immediately. The math doesn't work any other way. And they know that without significant and immediate increases in your giving to the operating budget of the church, the only path toward a balanced 2020/2021 budget is a significant reduction in the amount of professional ministry you fund. The math doesn't work any other way.

I say to you now, as I said to you nearly a year ago, the decision to

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I was at this very point in my sermon writing yesterday afternoon - the middle of that sentence now left incomplete -when a push notification from NPR news appeared on my phone alerting me to the shooting at the Chabad of Poway synagogue on the last day of Passover. One dead, three injured. The news appeared. My reaction was anger indistinguishable from sorrow. However this sermon was originally meant to turn it was gone in that moment.

Here's the thing: **people are dying for their faith.** People are dying in their places of worship, while practicing their faith. On Passover. On Easter Sunday. On random Fridays and Saturdays. And people are dying for lack of faith, or for the lack of faith communities, or for the lack of faith communities that tell them, regularly, clearly, consistently, and insistently that they are loved and precious and whole, just as they are.

Someone told me two weeks ago, a member of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mankato told me two weeks ago that she wishes there had been a UU church nearby when she was growing up in New Ulm. Well, there was a UU church nearby when she was growing up in New Ulm, told me what a difference it would have made in her youth and young adult years. Well, there was a UU church nearby when she was growing up—this church. To our shame, she just didn't know it.

Lucia told me just yesterday that one of her peers said our religion (how I loved hearing her call UUism 'our religion'!) a peer said our religion isn't a real religion because we believe in science.

And three days ago—**before** the most recent place of worship shooting (what an awful phrase, most recent place of worship shooting, most recent school shooting, most recent mass shooting)—three days ago I wrote my May Mere Lyscolumnn about Rachel weeping and about our call to bring about the time when she can cease from loud lamentation because her children have come back from the land of the enemy; her children have come back to their own country-- places of safety and security, of abundant food and plentiful water, of play and education, of whole families and vibrant neighborhoods in every corner of the world.

Our planet is dying because people don't refuse to accept or understand science, and because too often religion is used as a reason to refuse to accept or understand science. Our children and our neighbors are dying because no one is telling them they are beloved; because federal, state and local governments fail to ensure that they have adequate food and clean drinking water; because our politicians are too weak and too greedy to keep assault rifles from the hands of people who would hunt people; because the media and our elected officials and too many faith leaders settle for blaming and vilifying women and children when men and adults assault them, men and adults rape them, men impregnate them.

Unitarian Universalists are not alone among faith traditions in saying all these actions and failures to act are wrong—morally wrong, lethally wrong—but we do say it. And it matters that we say it, here at Nora Church, through our Unitarian Universalist Association, and by the work of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, and the Minnesota UU Social Justice Alliance, and Black Lives of UU, and in dozens of other ways.

It is common in pledge drive sermons, canvass sermons, stewardship sermons, for ministers and others to say that church members are called to give three things to their church: time, talent, and treasure. Know this: the decision you make in the next several days regarding the amount of your individual treasure to pledge to your church, and the decisions you make in the next couple months regarding the amount of your church's treasure to spend on professional ministry, the decisions you make about your treasure will have a direct effect on the amount of your time and your talent you are called upon to devote to keeping your church alive as a saving force in a world that needs saving. Only you, both at the individual level and at the congregational level can determine whether the current or future ratio of time to talent to treasure is optimal and sustainable.

It may be that Nora Church has only one loaves and fishes moment given to it in a generation and that the Historic Nordic Church grant/belfry appeal, bringing in nearly twice what was needed to make the match, was it for this generation. I can't tell you that.

I can tell you Rachel is weeping in Brown County and she will not be consoled. She is weeping for immigrants, here in Brown County (and Watonwan County and Nicollet County and Blue Earth County), for immigrants both documented and undocumented who fear for the lives of their family members who live in daily peril south of the border. She is weeping in Brown County (and Watonwan and Nicollet and Blue Earth and Redwood) for transgender youth who believe that if their families and their classmates and their pastor call them sick, unnatural, an abomination, then surely God must call them an abomination, too. She is weeping, here even in this patch of Minnesota for her children with black and brown skin who are told every day in ways far less subtle than we'd like to believe, that their lives are worth less—less than property, less than the fear of police officers, less than the peace of mind of store owners and shop keepers and pedestrians, less than, less than, less than. Rachel is weeping in Brown County for all parents who find it just a little bit more terrifying to send their children to school after each school shooting or bomb threat or lock down/shelter in place drill.

Rachel is weeping **in our home** and she *refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.*

The prophet urges *Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; promising there is a reward for your work, ...*

they shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future, says the Lord ... your children shall come back to their own country.

In our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition we believe the promises of the Lord, the work of justice and redemption and blessing, fall to the hands of humanity to carry out.

Now what?

Amen.