

A Sermon on Space  
Rev. Vanessa R. Southern  
The Unitarian Church in Summit  
April 17, 2011

I preached a sermon on March 6th that named the fact that I didn't see our future in this building. It is a feeling and a belief that is 10 years in the making, slow and accretive. After that sermon, many folks shared their thoughts about how we might solve the space struggles we have. All ideas were good, many very creative, and what I realized is that almost all — almost every single one of them — were solutions that I or others looking at this set of issues had thought of and explored to greater or lesser degrees. And it goes without saying that they were therefore also solutions we had rejected or tabled as too imperfect.

Tom Howard and the board and I felt like we needed to share with you, then, some of the processes and options explored by those of us who have looked at the space issue, so we can potentially all be on, if not the same page, at least a page with similar vocabulary and flow charts. This won't be sexy, but I think it is important. We'll try to be brief and riveting!

## **Part I: The History of the Investigation**

First, I want to talk about why some key lay leaders, staff and I came to think our space was becoming inadequate.

You think you *know* you are out of space only when the worship is standing-room-only. That's what those unschooled in church life think. It is what my family and friends say first when I tell them this is an issue that I am struggling with.

However, the experts across faith tradition say studies show that when a space is 80 percent full or more, people start to feel uncomfortable being in that space. That the space starts to work against you. It is not necessarily that folks think that consciously, but maybe going to church seems less appealing.

In our case, we would have to add to that equation the question of what it means when 75 of the 185 seats in the sanctuary have partially or fully obstructed views, and among the remaining 110, not all of them have full visibility of even the full chancel area — where we do magic box and storytelling and where we often have music playing. Those 110 seats have “full visibility” only of the head and shoulders of the person in the pulpit.

How does that affect our enjoyment of church — we who are increasingly of a generation (and more so with each next generation) who watch TV on large flat screens with high-definition picture resolution? We may be defensive about this truth, but it is the truth that this reality works against our enjoyment and the enjoyment of those late enough to service or new enough to the congregation to fall into one of the obstructed, awkward seats.

When we here hit 60 percent full, if people have chosen their seats well, then every single seat from which you can see the pulpit without craning your neck is *full*. This sanctuary is therefore a failure at serving a key piece of its purpose. I know that doesn't sound nice, but let's be honest. Is it beautiful? Yes! Great acoustics? Yes. Warm and intimate? Yes. Ability to see the place where all the action happens? Sixty percent successful — which, the last time I was in school, qualified as a failing grade.

If this were our only issue, it would be enough. But we have no parking. All our teenagers from eighth through 12th grades are relegated to Sunday evenings. And their parents, too, many of whom have lightened the load on Sunday morning because they have been basically disenfranchised from it. If you want to argue that coming Sunday evening is really a nice thing, then let me propose we switch and give ourselves that time slot and let them gather during the morning hours. It is not so nice.

And we have no space for adults to meet Sunday morning, and no real sacred space for children to worship — and for the record, we cannot have them with us every morning to compensate for that because there is not enough room. We have, then, shielded those of us here — adults who come Sunday morning — from some of the problems, like by moving the youth and their parents to the evening.

Enough of that. This space is inadequate. If we don't buy that, we are in denial. Stubborn? Being irrational? That's okay, as we'll talk about in Part II. It is understandable, but let's name it for what it is.

So what are our solutions? Here are the four greatest hits:

- 1) **Buy Dangler or the Christian Science property across the street.** We've been saying that for years. *I have been saying that.* Why isn't that a good, even ideal, option? Well, first, they aren't selling. Second, we've asked and they aren't selling. Third, the neighbors have given us such a problem about the level of activity we have here, they will fight us tooth and nail and tie us up in legal and city battles, that it will delay us years *if* the property is for sale. *And* just buying the building won't solve our problems. We would have to build a bigger sanctuary, which we might never get clearance to do. So do we wait decades for a solution that is possibly unworkable? How many decades?
- 2) **We spin off a congregation,** which is to say, send other people away so we can have our church back. Great idea — who is going? And who is paying for this new spin-off, its staff and building? It may be nice to think of others having to bear the pain of that decision, but not practical. Moreover, not ethical. In addition to this, I am more and more convinced that the moment we create breathing room here, we will very likely grow big enough to have this problem once more. So

why not find a long-term solution for being an attractive place to go for all of us, together?

- 3) **Buy another church building that is for sale.** This is a fine idea. We looked at a bunch two years ago. It is fine until you realize 99 percent of those selling are selling because their congregation died off slowly, painfully, and the building reflects slow deterioration and neglect and you are buying it — mildewed, unloved. Moreover, however, the average church in America is 150 members, so the vast majority of church buildings are built for that size congregation. We are over three times that big already. Their buildings, then, would either become our problems or are too small to even consider. Finally, old church buildings often look, well, *old* (and not in a good way) and, well, *churchy* (and not in an appropriate way for us in our more broad-based theologies).
- 4) **We could buy property and plan and build the church building that serves not just our purpose today, but the larger purpose we can see stepping into.** We could, and with an aesthetic that reflects who we are and are becoming, so our space reflects to us who we are, reinforces our sense of ourselves, and we could build that place as close to the center of our base of members as possible, knowing that there is an unseen barrier of about 25 minutes beyond which many people won't drive to go to their house of worship.

The weakness of that option is stepping right into change, challenge, uncertainty and loss. And it is this that I am asking us to consider.

## **Part II: Change Is Spelled ...**

At the Minns Lecture Series I attended last weekend, and in which I participated, a colleague repeated some supposedly well-worn saying that went something like, “In God’s heart is vision of what can be and in God’s pocket is change.” The colleague went on to say that many people think change is spelled not c-h-a-n-g-e but l-o-s-s.

Indeed.

Even psychologists now validate that we feel greater pain with any loss of anything we came to know as our own *than the joy that was ours in having it or getting whatever it was in the first place*. So loss is more heavily weighted in the equations of all change than gain. And, of course, so often what we can see and touch and know is what we are giving up, and what we will gain is more often theoretical, imagined, not yet here, not yet real. A bird in the hand missed more than the two promised in the bush.

To end, I want to share an email from a colleague. This colleague, Jane Rzepka, is one of our “ministers to the ministers.” She is one of the most highly respected colleagues I know, revered by everyone who knows her, born and raised Unitarian Universalist. When I told her about our struggle here, she shared with me a letter she wrote. She wrote it when she found out that her home church, the church of her childhood, was giving up and leaving its building. She wrote:

When I was little, my parents sometimes held church meetings in our living room. Our Unitarian fellowship wanted to buy its first church building, and I remember the grown-ups poring over a map of Lake County, marking the addresses of each member, so the committee would know where a central location would be.

They bought a big old mansion. I remember: Everybody was scared about the money. But we converted the place and moved our congregation in, and I spent a Sunday school year in every one of the rooms — including the kitchen, basement, and attic. Like every other kid, I can describe the rooms exactly.

In 1970, Chuck and I were married in the sanctuary. A few years later the congregation ordained me in that same room. During subsequent visits to Ohio, our children attended Sunday school in those odd classrooms, and in 1994, we had my dad's memorial service there and planted a tree for him on the church grounds. No place else holds as much nostalgic value for me.

They're selling it. They're selling the church and building something bigger someplace else.

I want to stop here for a moment.

*This building holds all the same memories for this community, as a whole, as the one Jane describes does for her family and for her. This building has been the setting for 100 years of rites of passage, countless childhood hours of running around, worship that has held broken hearts and inspired new hope, meaningful coming-of-age services, for saying final goodbyes, blessing new life, potluck suppers, silly sing-a-longs, heart-rendingly beautiful music, calls to action, vigils to hold collective fear and uncertainty. It holds lifetimes.*

When all the world around it changes, this place has stayed the same, plus or minus a new coat of paint, an upgraded sound system, maybe a change in the curtains or the passing of personalities in its pulpit and its pews.

Why even think of moving?

A member I never met passed away this last year. He had moved out west. He used to say we worshipped the building here, not God or goodness or a certain set of values. I ran into Satt Oishi, a longtime member now a Massachusetts resident, when I was up in Boston for the Minns lectures, and he said that in Jake Trapp's time, with 750 members inadequately held in

this space, a handful of long-time leaders used to hover and murmur in corners with some frustration that maybe a fire would happen here sometime.

I say this because I want us to know that this is not the first time these issues have risen to the surface here. It isn't the first time our space has been perceived as limiting this community, stunting its growth, been the misplaced focus of its mission or its worship. As far as I can tell, it is just that no other generation has gotten clear enough to see the struggle, the pain, the discomfort through to a lasting, visionary solution.

Let me say something else here, something that there is no perfect place to say. People have said to me, but more often behind my back, that raising this issue is about Vanessa wanting a bigger pulpit. In a way, I suppose, it is true. But why? Why a bigger pulpit for me and for you?

Because, just for the record, each year for the last seven I have been asked by the denomination or the churches themselves to apply to serve a large pulpit in our movement — some of the largest and most vibrant — and I have said “no.” I have said “no” because it isn't just a large pulpit I want. What I want is to continue to serve vibrant but also less unnecessarily bounded ministry *with you*.

We have some of the most gifted, warm, intelligent, passionate people I have ever met. And one of the truths about our religion is that it is dying, slowly against population growth, growing irrelevant. And one of the other truths is that all significant leadership comes not from headquarters in Boston but from our congregations. Congregations like ours. Most often it is the larger congregations that have the resources to multiply their ministries beyond their walls that do this. Our region and our movement need more such congregations, and I think we are poised and perfect to step into that role. Someone has to, or we will cease to have a voice in the important dialogues and public discourse of our time. It is this role I want us to be enabled to step into.

There is a new church, only 4½ years old, down in one of the wealthiest Philadelphia suburbs. It's called Wellsprings, grounded in a new vision of Unitarian Universalism. While writing colleagues this week to ask about their favorite worship spaces for the slide show I will share with you after this, the minister of this community wrote me back not with pictures but with words. I want to share with you what he wrote.

Writing about favorite worship spaces, Ken Beldon wrote:

Hi Vanessa:

Oh, I could go on about this!

When I first got to town here and some of the people who bankrolled us wanted to give us money for a permanent physical space, I told them I was a “building agnostic,” how I had witnessed many churches ... turn their mission into building acquisition and maintenance. Fortunately, they listened and liberated that money for us to invest in other

areas. Rick Warren also has a good truism for the property-obsessed: Focus on being a blessing, not the building.

As for worship spaces I love, it really all depends on the context of the worship service itself. Even if it wasn't my theology, I liked what a born-again church in Ocala, Fla., did in converting an abandoned supermarket into a high-tech space that could hold 800-plus. I remember an MCC church in Hell's Kitchen that packed 100 or so into an old loft and really raised the roof with the Spirit.

I like space where the soul can move and also know intimacy with other souls, where it's not so formal that you're afraid to sneeze or cough. Any place that's dynamic, rather than static, where you can imagine and invite a large bandwidth of human experience. The more traditional a church looks, the more I like it as a museum-going experience and the less I like it for worship. The more a worship space says to me, "It's about these people in this time in this place listening and practicing together how to live in tune with the Sacred," and the less it says to me, "We're about preserving a heritage," that's what I look for ...

Hope the above perspective is helpful for you!

Blessings,  
Ken

I share Ken's thoughts not because I agree with them all, but because he raises some important points.

I know some of you are afraid of what our space might look like if we leave this behind. And I want to show you in our slide show later some beautiful spaces, a range of visions of what *can be*, so you have in your head the possibility of a place where we all fit, with room to grow and serve with greater power and possibility. In other words, I will try to show you and invite you to see, literally, that this issue can be about more than l-o-s-s.

However, I thought we *first* ought to get clear that the change we would embrace, the uncertainty, the pain and challenge with all the incumbent letting go, is not something we do to find a more beautiful place. It will be hard, first of all, to find or make a more beautiful space than the one we have. I think we have to do this work instead because we are committed to finding a space to hold all of what we are becoming.

Of course, any space we live in will, I hope, be gorgeous. I hope it would be an inspired architectural marvel. I actually hope it will be a cathedral to progressive religion and our commitment in stone and glass and wood that we think our values are important to the world and shaping it as it unfolds. *And* our focus should not be on the building, but as Ken said, on finding a way to be a blessing, about finding room to be dynamic, and large enough to hold the whole bandwidth of human experience and aspiration. A place to spread our wings.

And so Jane Rzepka, born and raised Unitarian Universalist, married and ordained in the church she played in as a child, a church that she remembers her parents and their friends

building, a place imbued with love and memories, finishes her letter about that church and the change ahead saying:

They're selling it. They're selling the church and building something bigger someplace else. And I (not that it's any of my business) *think it's great!* They have a new vision, new enthusiasm, and just the right amount of gumption, nerve, and imagination.

The memories will be true memories now, and the way cleared for Unitarian Universalism of the next generation. Full steam ahead.

I've been thinking a lot lately about people who have come before me and us, and about the realization that every time a congregation or institution has outgrown its mission and the space that houses it, in every corner of the world and every faith tradition, it has taken a community with so much love for the mission that they are able to say and do as Jane and her family did once, for the greatest good, and in order that the dream, *the real dream, the heart of it*, can live.

It has taken a community of people willing to take the pain. To take the lead. And who, when they do so, trust that change is more than loss — that it is more like that currency in the pocket of the divine, moving us toward the vision of what can be.

And I keep thinking, may we be such a people.

### **Part III: A Slide Show of UU Sacred Architecture**

Knowing that part of what helps me be willing to risk is some sense of what I might be headed toward, what possibilities await, I asked colleagues to tell me of their favorite larger UU sanctuary spaces and pulled together (in what took quite a lot of time) a slide show of some of those.

*[Note: Those who would like to see it should let me know. I can send a version of it for you to view.]*