

What Do the Evangelicals Know ... That We Don't?  
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The Unitarian Church in Summit  
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Most of you may remember the film "Field of Dreams," in which Iowa farmer Ray Kinsella, Kevin Costner's character, hears and obeys voices that compel him to convert a large portion of his cornfield into a baseball diamond so that he can find redemption and help others to find a whole life. Toward the end, as Ray is about to lose his farm because he has no money, a '60s radical novelist named Terrence Mann (played by James Earl Jones), who has been born again because of Ray's efforts, urges Ray to remain steadfast in his faith:

Ray, people will come, Ray. They'll come to Iowa for reasons they can't even fathom. They'll turn up your driveway not knowing for sure why they're doing it. They'll arrive at your door as innocent as children, longing for the past. "Of course, we won't mind if you look around," you'll say. "It's only \$20 per person." They'll pass over the money without even thinking about it: for it is money they have and peace they lack.

And they'll watch the game and it'll be as if they dipped themselves in magic waters. The memories will be so thick they'll have to brush them away from their faces. People will come, Ray. The one constant through all the years, Ray, has been baseball. America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It has been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt and erased again. But baseball has marked the time. This field, this game: it's a part of our past, Ray. It reminds us of all that once was good and [that] could be again.

That is how I imagine the evangelical Christian church in America, not that I have been to one recently. I imagine that the congregants come looking for meaning and hand over their time and money eagerly, hoping that it will allow them to dip themselves in the "magic waters" of Terrence Mann, to find an answer that gives meaning to their lives. I found that for many congregations, this was very true – and the same seems to be true for many of us. Isn't that one of the underlying truths, that we are searching for meaning and purpose and relevance as we confront an end that more and more seems to await us with impatience? Isn't that also why we come to church, because it is money and business that we have but peace and meaning that we lack?

The Rev. William Metzger of the First Unitarian Church in Philadelphia said in a recent sermon:

Bishop John Shelby Spong in his book *Jesus for the Non-Religious* writes that "religion at its core represents compensatory, human activity." Religion, he contends, is a "device that our species used to cope with the awakening of self-consciousness and anxiety." We may think, as Unitarian Universalists, that we have somehow broken free from this compensatory activity. Perhaps we have in the sense that we have abandoned many traditional theological ideas, but the truth

is that our participation in church still compensates for something that is missing from our lives in the world. This may be what some have called “a god-sized hole” in our lives.

We come here for a reason. Even those of us who consider ourselves atheists know that we come here for a reason. And the reason is that we do find something missing from our lives if we are not part of a religious community. We may not choose to cope with our anxiety by seizing on a lot of fantastic theological constructs that make no rational sense, but there remains that hole that we seek to fill.

We seek to fill the hole through the creation of an intimate community of kindred spirits here; we want company on the challenging journey through life, and people with whom to find ways of making the world better.

Evangelical Christian churches (among which I include the Mormons) have three distinguishing characteristics, regardless of whether they are conservative or progressive:

- (1) A scriptural foundation, frequently founded in a literal reading of the Bible.
- (2) Devotion to Jesus as their personal savior.
- (3) A belief that their mission is to practice their faith by reflecting the love of Jesus.

As said so plainly and accessibly by the Parkview Church in Iowa City, Iowa: “Our mission is to love God, love others, and serve the world.” You know exactly what they believe. This sermon, then, is about that mission as restated in the last sentence of Reverend Metzger that I quoted above, the phrase that sums up why we are here in a religious community, the phrase that tells us what we can learn from the evangelicals – that we come together “to find ways of making the world better.”

I began my effort by imagining that many evangelicals have a handle on generosity. Evangelicals are expected to tithe – to give 10 percent of their income to their church in support of their faith. And many of the congregants, both rich and poor, fulfill that expectation – perhaps most importantly, they do so willingly, so that they almost do not need to be asked. Because their church is so important to them that they feel impelled to give freely, without conscious constraint, of their time, their money, their dreams. Evangelical congregations have high expectations of their adherents, among them the requirement of generous contributions to the church’s mission, as well as the commitment of time, regular attendance and committed service. The expectation is that each member will abide by what Paul – the founder of the Christian church who had persecuted Christians when he was known as Saul and remained as judgmental and doctrinaire after he underwent an involuntary conversion, the original epiphany, on the road to Damascus – instructed his disciple in *1 Timothy 6:17-19* of what the Christian Bible calls the New Testament:

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

One thing we can learn from these evangelicals is to raise our expectations of ourselves in coming to this place, in being members of this congregation. After all, this place is not an academic institution or a fraternal organization. This is a religious institution, whether you call it a church, a fellowship, a congregation or “the place I go on Sunday mornings.” We come here because of some quality that is incidental to religious communities, for something more than mere intellectual stimulation, and that is why our services are on Sunday and involve many traditionally religious rituals.

We also can learn about being generous and raising our expectations about generosity. If, like evangelicals, we come to cleanse ourselves in the “magic waters,” why are we expected to give less to our church than our evangelical sisters? Perhaps most importantly, why do our congregations give so much less to social programs, to outreach, to help the people of this world in some way than theirs do? Is it that we are less committed than the evangelicals? If generosity can be translated into commitment, and I believe it can be, then why are evangelicals more committed to their churches than we are? If it is true that evangelicals better define the purpose of their religious community and the expectations of their participation, then we must learn from them.

I ventured into this area for two reasons. First, because I had become distressed by the results of last year’s annual pledge campaign. Yes, we raised a lot of money, and I appreciate every penny, each of which is a gift of something dear. But we fell short of our dreams. Of course, you might say, times are tough, people are unemployed, others are uncertain, looking at what my former English professor called the abyss. Those facts certainly provide an explanation, but they do not provide an answer to what I want to know: Why do we give at all, how do we decide what is enough, how can we get beyond resembling those annoying PBS/NPR on-air fund drives?

Second, while I hesitate to say it, because I sound like almost every person I know who has attended the UUA General Assembly, which I did this past June, the experience of GA greatly affected me, as if I had an epiphany of my own, but without the blindness and the voice of God that Paul claimed he had experienced. Admittedly, as I encourage each of you to discover, the atmosphere at GA is intoxicating – it energized me, opened my mind to new ways of thinking, and, most significantly, offered me ideas on what we could do differently. Because I was interested in how to improve our fundraising, I met with Michael Durall, a UU consultant who helps churches of all faiths in overcoming obstacles to faithful giving and the author of several books, two of which I have now read. In *The Almost Church Revitalized*, at pp. 45-47, he asks the essential question:

“What is the purpose of the church? What should we be about?” The answer is unexpectedly simple. Schools educate students. Widget manufacturers make widgets. The purpose of the church is to develop spiritually mature members. This is our “product line,” people who find within themselves the courage, fortitude, and stamina to stake out better lives for themselves, their families, and their fellow citizens. Unitarian Universalism should not be a religious movement for fringe members, spectators, or the uncommitted.

Developing spiritually mature members will not happen with people sitting in groups, talking and listening. Right living is more the challenge than right thinking.

Enlightened reason, the hallowed tradition that supports much UU church programming, is insufficient in creating a spiritually mature congregation. Enlightened reason does not define a collective path that a congregation might travel together. UU minister Paul Hull correctly states, “Unitarian Universalism should drop its emphasis on enlightened reason and substitute an affirmation of how people find true meaning in their lives.”

Some UUs may feel a bit unsettled at the description of a committed Unitarian Universalist being one who is on a journey toward spiritual maturity. They may be thinking, “The church shouldn’t define the spiritual life for me. I can do that on my own, or not do that if I please.” Humanists and atheists may be thinking that the spiritual life is too “religious” and holds little interest for them. In addition, people lead busy lives these days. How could they possibly find time to develop a spiritual life?

We should be honest with ourselves and admit that we are a low-expectation movement, we ask very little of us. As one minister often says, “A lot of churches motivate people to go home and have lunch.” We have made membership too easy, too comfortable, too convenient. Many church members may perceive no need for the congregation to seek a future that is appreciably different from today. Members enjoy the preaching, the music, the fellowship, the coffee, the church’s programs, their kids’ Sunday school, participating in a book discussion group, and being part of a short-term outreach project from time to time. Preferably, all this doesn’t cost very much and isn’t too inconvenient. Why change something that people find comfortable?

The fundamental question becomes whether contentment is a valid goal. However, UU minister Julie-Ann Silberman-Bunn believes that hotels and day spas are in the satisfaction business, but congregations are not:

A church is not a place where you are catered to and pampered. Our congregations are religious communities, sanctuaries for those in need, safe havens, and respites from the chaos of the world. Churches neither expect nor guarantee your satisfaction.

She further suggests that people harbor a misunderstanding of religious life. They come into churches and sit down in the same manner as they enter restaurants or concert halls, like spectators coming to enjoy what is prepared for them, what is served up for their senses. Thus many do not understand the complex requirements of being a valued participant in a community of faith.

Church communities should be pushed to the edge of their comfort zones. Congregations should also be called to do things they think they cannot do. Collective accomplishment is a critical factor in creating healthy communities of all types.

We should demand a faith that asks something of us, not settle for one that requires very little.

The purpose of a church is not to bring people into the building and “cage” them in programs. The purpose of a church is to empower people, challenge them to lead more purposeful lives, and provide them the courage to make the world a better place in which to live. Therein lies the difference between the traditional church and the progressive church. It’s not a matter of a liberal or conservative theology. Rather, the litmus test is people becoming different from who they once were.

I come here to be transformed – to be different than I once was. To some extent it has worked. I certainly am not the shy boy that I remember as a Presbyterian Sunday school participant in Pennington, New Jersey. I have found this to be my religious community. But I am not as generous and not as committed as I want to be. I want to be consumed with passion for the church, for the community and for what it does – for what it does that I cannot do on my own, that I can only do through a community like this. Most importantly, I believe that most of us in this congregation share a similar desire.

While David Segarnick plays the Meditation, I ask that you consider: Why do you come here, what is your purpose, why do you make this effort that requires you on Sunday morning to put down the paper, turn off the computer and, for most, get in the car, so that you can sit still for an hour, bear up through a few hymns, listen quietly to a few people telling you about what they think is important, and hold other people’s hands? And, while you contemplate, ask yourself: Why here, why a church, why a religious service – why did you choose to come here rather than all the other places that meet at other times and on other days that do not include a test of faith but offer music, or speakers, or socializing?

## **Part Two: Generosity Is the Essence of this Religious Community**

The Rev. Gordon MacDonald, a generally evangelical preacher and author, wrote in *The Generosity Book*:

The generous giver is someone whose heart generates love. It is not a sentimental or romantic love, but a love built on compassion and care, a love that is drawn to the broken and fragmented creatures and conditions of our world. This kind of love values human beings as those created in God’s image. It is accompanied by a righteous anger at systems and forces that perpetuate the suffering and ignorance of others. This kind of love cannot contain itself when there are opportunities to change lives and circumstances for those unable to change their own situation.

You may have noticed the words that appear on the front cover of today’s program: *Embracing bold living by unleashing compassion on a needful world*. The words are essentially Vanessa’s, to set forth her vision of the mission of this church. I agree with her; that is what her series of sermons on bold living was all about. This Unitarian Universalism is not and cannot be a private faith, confined within the walls of this chapel like that of a monastic trying to find God

in isolation from the world. It is a religion of personal belief but public witness through generous outreach and social action. We celebrate together so that we may “make a difference in the world” – for that is the only way that we will find meaning in this life.

To quote Michael Durall again, this time in his book *Beyond the Collection Plate* at pp. 73-74:

The Unitarian Universalist theologian Thandeka often asks of religious communities: Who is served by your church? The answer to this simple yet powerful question speaks volumes about whether the congregation is called to do God’s work, or if it serves only its own members. People may need the comfort and respite of church as a sanctuary from distress – some frequently, others less so. But this cannot be a church’s main focus. Churches are called to serve.

Whom does your church serve that is truly in need? And whom does your church serve that already enjoys life’s bounty?

Being a generous person or family is one of life’s great privileges. Clergy, lay leaders, and people in the pews should all foster this notion. Those who are drawn to such a church will find themselves entering into and engaged by a culture of welcoming and sharing. What a wonderful church that is.

In the past few years, several members of our congregation have led us in that direction. As many of you may know, this congregation was honored twice at that assembly. First, we were recognized as a Breakthrough Congregation – one of four recognized for overcoming obstacles to achieve significant and sustained numerical growth. And, you ask, why had we achieved this growth and this recognition? For the Irvington initiative, for the Centennial Fund gifts and for the very same reason that we received the second award, the UUSC Social Justice Congregation Award, which we received as described by the UUSC (Unitarian Universalist Service Committee), for

*exemplary achievements as a congregation to advance human-rights work in collaboration with UUSC. The church’s Social Action Committee, led by Chair Gary Nissenbaum, worked in concert with staff at UUSC to raise funds for Rights in Humanitarian Crises relief efforts during the last two years. This partnership has become a model that UUSC seeks to duplicate with other congregations.*

I returned from General Assembly inspired by what I heard and saw. Indeed, I was awed by what other congregations had achieved and by the recognition we had received. I realized that as newly elected board president, I was in the right place at the right time, and I had acquired the necessary knowledge, to make sure that we continued and extended our effort, incorporating it ever more deeply into the fabric of this congregation, making it the focus of our mission as a religious fellowship.

With that in mind, the board of trustees has committed to this statement of vision for the next five years:

*We are a congregation modeled on what many of us knew as children, which explains why many of our programs seem so familiar to us. That era*

*disappeared with Ronald Reagan, with the passing of the Age of Aquarius and the comfort of institutional religion.*

*What are we doing to invite 20- and 30-somethings to participate beyond RE, in our outreach, in our Sunday programs, in leadership (and to welcome them when they do)? How are we planning to replace our generations as we age and move away?*

*We have achieved amazing things through this congregation. Let's set those achievements as the foundation from which we begin the next stages on our journey. Bold living is a way of life, not a phase we pass through or an adventure that we later recall fondly.*

*The Board has agreed to commit with our ministers to bring our congregation into the 21st century, to establish principles to guide the congregation for the next five years by:*

- *Revisiting why we joined this congregation, reconsidering how we give and our purposes in giving, and rebuilding our financial framework to support the congregation we are becoming.*
- *Inviting, introducing, and incorporating new members, and accepting all that ensues, including new leaders and innovations.*
- *Confronting the limits that our building and constrained space impose on our community, imagining with excitement what will take us to the place of "more," not remaining in the "old same place" where we believe ourselves to be safe and secure.*
- *Moving into the digital world, transforming our sanctuary, our offices, our presence from that of a mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century pastoral church into a religious community that can meet the needs of generations raised in the digital information age.*

Everything that this congregation does, everything we hope to achieve, depends upon the commitment and generosity of its members. The most important part of what we can learn from the evangelicals is to change the way we think of this congregation. This community is an expression of our dreams and values. What we do here to further the mission of this church will be the fountain that sustains us by giving meaning to our lives; it will give us what we cannot find in our work or entertainment; it will give us what we search for here; it is our purpose.

The Rev. Tim Reimer of the Redeemer Presbyterian Church on upper Broadway across the river in New York, an extraordinarily active and growing mainline congregation that has taken on many of the aspects of an evangelical church, recently delivered a sermon titled "Defined by Generosity." We can learn from how that church views its mission in life, just like we can learn from the evangelicals' vision of the role of a religious community in modern America. Reverend Reimer talks about why he believes that the members of his congregation come to his church:

We want people to remember how we cared for the needs of others, how we supported our church and missions. Things that we spend most of our lives thinking are important all of a sudden seem so unimportant at the end of our life. At the end, does it matter how high we climbed on the corporate ladder, often

sacrificing time with family and friends? At the end, does it matter that we bought all that “stuff” at the expense of giving back to God? At the end, it can be painful to look back and realize how many of the things which we spent so much time worrying over were the wrong things to be worrying about. It is easy to look back and see a house full of stuff that in the end will just end up in the trash or at a garage sale. As Paul tells us in his letter to Timothy, you can’t take anything with you at the end.

Let us learn from the evangelicals how to be committed to generosity, to being liberal in our sharing and giving. Through your giving, you can change the world in sometimes small and sometimes large ways. Hear again Paul’s words to Timothy. We are to be generous and ready to share so that we may experience the life that really is life.

As Michael Durall wrote: “The purpose of a church is to empower people, challenge them to lead more purposeful lives, and provide them the courage to make the world a better place in which to live.”

Generosity in furtherance of that mission is the essence of religious community.

Thank you.