

## **Our Journey from a Culture of Conflict to a Renewal of Covenant**

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Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: 305, De Colores; 350, Here We Have Gathered; 298, Wake Now, My Senses

Message for All Ages: Where Have We Been?

Reflection by Jim: From UUC to UUSS

### Sermon

During my recent sabbatical, I finished writing a cultural and historical study of this congregation. My general time frame was the 1980s and 1990s. Under the guidance of my dissertation advisor, I studied UUSS archives and interviewed several members. A sabbatical is thought of as a minister's time away from church, but in those months, I was immersed in this congregation's history. I wrote at a desk in the corner window of my bedroom, with boxes of papers around me. I spent every day with our archives and slept with them at night. Thank you, Shirley Hines. She's our former archivist.

The result was nine chapters, 300 pages, 470 footnotes. Some parts are academic; other parts, dramatic. You are welcome to read the whole thing.<sup>1</sup>

Today I'd like to highlight the journey this congregation has made from patterns of animosity to a renewed practice of shared community. UUSS used to be a splintered congregation. We were an association of individual interests, of separate factions, of silos. We grew into a community held by covenant as by the strands of a web, a web of inter-dependence.

The 1980s and 90s were a time of growth and activity for UUSS--not unlike this time. Amazing things were going on: a Public Forum every Sunday with noted speakers on significant issues, an active UUSS Women's Alliance, our Theater One company producing plays as it had since the early '60s. We had many activity groups and social events—lots of parties. It was an era of activism and energy.

Unfortunately, it was also a time of mistrust among members, lay leaders, clergy and staff members. An adversarial culture is reflected in reports, meeting minutes and correspondence. It is recalled by lay leaders from that era. Another lens for me to look at that era was found in the reports of several interim ministers at UUSS. Coming with a fresh perspective, an interim is a transitional minister, like a consultant, serving one or two years before a church calls a new settled minister. Back in 1970 Josiah Bartlett served in that role. He had served several congregations and had been the president of our seminary in Berkeley. Bartlett said we were a "large and talented congregation." We had "unlimited potential," but we "appeared to be stuck in a rut." There was apathy, frustration and animosity among many members here. Such a pattern, he said, was not "the creation of any single minister or one board." Our habits of being were so ingrained, so pervasive, that we could not even see them.

This, I think, is a definition of culture-- habits, patterns, attitudes and ways of being which so familiar that you don't notice them. You don't notice. And when unhealthy patterns are pointed out you don't know how to change them. Bartlett said it would take effort to "become conscious of our pattern[s]" and more effort to break through them. That was 1970. Future interim ministers would make similar statements 15 years later, 20 years later, and 30 years later!

A few notable observations by Bartlett. He said this church gave off the impression of "middle

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<sup>1</sup> It is not possible to cover everything in one sermon, so I will resist the temptation. I wrote also about the predominance of women in American religion, and wrote about our Women's Alliance, founded in 1911 and still meeting once a month. I wrote about newer Unitarian Universalist congregations established in this area from the 1960s to the 1990s, including the UU Community Church, some of whose founders left UUSS in 1989 to extend the UU faith to South

Sacramento. I studied social class dynamics as reflected in U.S. congregations, and this one in particular. I summarized recent trends of religious affiliation and church attendance in this country, and the rise of spiritual seekers. I suggested what progressive congregations might have to offer younger generations.

aged, middle class whites listening to sermons or ‘interesting discussions’ and little else.” No clear sense of purpose. He said our lay leadership had a reputation for resistance to change. At the heart of the problem, Bartlett said, was the “either-or” mentality of our stakeholders, those who pit “my program” versus “your program. What was lacking was an explicit loyalty to “our congregation” -- a sense of shared commitment. Bartlett urged us to refurbish unattractive rooms and reduce clutter. We needed to catch up on deferred maintenance. What is notable is that our building was only 10 years old when he said this!

In 1984, Aron Gilmartin served as our next interim minister. Also bringing years of experience to USS, Gilmartin observed that our lay leaders felt overburdened and unappreciated, and there was more work to do. They made exhortations for more volunteer help. What is striking to me is how large the congregation was--500 members.

Gilmartin asked, “Can you imagine the richness of talents and skills, experience and knowledge that a congregation [like this] must possess?” He offered his diagnosis of the problem: a lack of real and felt connections among people and a need for trust among the members and leaders. He said most members are not invited to help out because they are not known. The first step, he said, is “getting to know people we do not know... Really getting to know them. And because we really want *to know* them. (Not just use them.)”

It can be tempting to pin such a culture on one minister or another, or on the actions of particular lay leaders. But as easy as that might seem, doing so ignores the power of culture and habit. In the records of committee and Board activities here from 1983 to 1990, there is little evidence that this was a religious community. It was like a membership organization, an association of interest groups. In hindsight, it seems that the congregation looked to the secular culture to model its ways of working and interacting. It was a managerial culture.

Whatever might or might not have been heard from the pulpit, the internal correspondence has nearly no use of words like *trust*, *covenant*, *forgiveness*, *patience*, *imperfection*, *compassion*, or *gratitude*. To be sure, appreciation was expressed for hard workers and those who devoted themselves in service to the church. Yet there are many more

examples of concern for close adherence to parliamentary procedure, thorough documentation, and orientation to task. In 1989, interim minister Eileen Karpeles led a workshop to “focus on the role of committees...in building a spirit of belonging and mutual trust in the congregation.” The impulse to task-orientation, she said, “must be resisted until members and friends have a greater sense of cohesiveness.” The process for gaining this cohesiveness, she said, “is simply learning techniques for dealing with one another less rancorously.”

Judy Bell recalled that lay leaders sometimes did not explain their decisions as well as they might have before making changes. That may be understandable, as there was a climate of criticizing those volunteer leaders unkindly and second-guessing the Board.

Ginny Johnson said: “There was a sense among some people that if you hadn’t been here a long time, your opinion didn’t matter.” Indeed, three women I interviewed spoke about one man, a lay leader who was controlling and aggressive and not open to others’ perspectives. A young woman, Ginny stood up to him: “[Hey, mister], my opinion matters just as much as yours does!” (She didn’t say “Hey, mister,” she just addressed him by name.)

How did we get from there to here, to this present experience of shared commitment?

Two of the primary ingredients were courage and covenant.

In the late 1980s, the congregation began looking at the ways people communicated, especially how members expressed disagreement. With support from interim ministers Eileen Karpeles, Douglas Strong and many volunteers, USS held workshops about personality styles and group dynamics, and listening to understand and not merely refute others. And if those methods wouldn’t work, then: how to remain steady when tempers flare and words fly.

Participation in these activities are evidence that our congregation was trying to learn better ways of working together. In the 1990s this work was formalized in the Communication and Conflict Management Committee. It hosted regular workshops and monthly conversations about issues of concern or confusion—ways to clear the air. A trained Conflict Management Team offered facilitation between members who had a

misunderstanding or who felt hurt by other members or staff or the minister. These efforts at reconciliation and congregational self-understanding laid a necessary foundation.

Our lay leaders began to speak frankly and act with courage for the health of the congregation. In the mid-1990s, a new member got very involved in the life of the congregation, first as a volunteer, then as an outspoken critic, and then as an insatiable source of demands of the clergy and lay leaders. He refused to hear feedback on his behavior—he would not accept the word *no*. For example, he would use the church equipment and paper to make 400 copies of his letters to the members, and then he would drive them to fellow members' homes or places of work.

Yet he found some traction in the congregation by raising the principle of the freedom of speech and of dissent. Yet such a defense neglected the principle of protecting members from harassment, verbal assault, or his trespassing on their property. In a long, hard series of events, the Board of Trustees expelled him from UUSS membership. On appeal by his advocates in the congregation, the Board reconsidered his case, but then reaffirmed its decision. Its lawyer instructed him to stay off the premises. When he continued in violation of that order, he was arrested, right here on a Sunday morning. (And you thought our fire ceremony was dramatic in worship!)

Of course, different members have different opinions about all of the measures taken to stop his behaviors—how much limitation on him was too much, or too soon or too late.

Of course, there are different perspectives in a diverse community. Yet our lay leaders are charged with caring for the health and well-being of the congregation as a whole. They are nominated for, elected to, and entrusted with this role.

Excessive time and energy spent in responding to the relentless criticism and boundless exhortations of one faction or person—are time and energy *not available* for taking initiative on any larger goals or purposes of the congregation, including the oversight of infrastructure, fundraising, and strategic planning, let alone time and energy for a lay leader's family life or spiritual renewal.

This crisis was one of two from the 1990s which I see as turning points in the culture of the congregation. Here's the next one:

By 1997, tensions were growing around the minister who had been called and settled six years earlier. Gifted in intellect and creativity, he had had a strong start at UUSS. However, his habits of defensiveness, impatience and anger erupted into a crisis. His actions led to member and staff resignations. Some people wanted him to stay and work things out, but many others had lost faith in the relationship. Amid so much disagreement and confusion, our Board of Trustees told him to resign and negotiated a severance agreement with him.

The Communication and Conflict Management Committee facilitated a series of listening circles for members. Called *Steps toward Healing*, these meetings invited people to speak from their experience about the minister AND to listen to one another's perspectives. After his departure, we were served by the Reverend Dr. Shirley Ranck. Shirley had started here only months earlier as our half-time pastoral care minister, but for the next year and a half, her ministerial work increased exponentially. She was the only ordained staff member. In 1999, the Board hired a married co-ministry couple to provide a year of interim ministry—Sydney Wilde and Dennis Daniel.

With their collaborative style and their encouragement, UUSS resumed its earlier work toward a covenant. In January of 2000, Sydney invited members to participate in a series of workshops. She said this work would lead to a “covenant of mutual respect and support, a covenant of behavior which honors the worth and dignity of all our members and friends.” She stressed that members of a community need to cultivate “an awareness that everything we do affects the lives of others.” While the congregation would be articulating other visions and goals in later months and years, she said, a covenant of right relations is the necessary foundation for success.

“In the final analysis,” she said, “how we treat one another makes all the difference.” Over a series of workshops, forums, sermons and newsletter articles, the congregation drafted a statement of Covenant. Church members adopted it by vote and ritualized it in a signing ceremony.

The center of our faith, and the heritage of our Unitarian Universalist faith, is covenant. A covenant is how the members understand our mutual support and presence for one another. A covenant is a statement of inter-dependence and trust in one another.

As the congregation took these steps toward right relationship, it called a new minister. The Reverend Doug Kraft discerned in this congregation the stirrings of health—and a heart of love. In Doug's first several months, the congregation discerned and proclaimed its Mission and Values, official words to accompany the Covenant adopted before his arrival. Members recall that Doug listened to people, and he loved them into listening to one another. In a church based on covenant and not on a creed, we are held together by our connections. We can't connect if we can't communicate.

One way that Doug promoted listening at the level of the heart was by launching the small-group ministry program called Ministry Circles, known in some UU churches as Covenant Groups.<sup>2</sup>

The most historic change of that era was the adoption of a Long Range Plan. This took several conversations and retreats among members, lay leaders and clergy. Congregation members voted to adopt our five-year goals in 2008. The vote was unanimous. Then we achieved our goals. You are sitting in the result of one of those goals. The building project was hard work, but it was not the work of a lonely few. It was a shared effort.

That Long Range Plan was a sign of the shift away from habits of animosity and factionalism. It was a sign of trust. Moreover, the actual work of *making* the plan was part of the process of learning to trust—to listen and to dream, imagine and be creative together. That process yielded so much energy and confidence, that we're going to do it again. Stay tuned, and see your [August newsletter](#) for details on Long Range Planning.

Doug Kraft concluded his ministry at the end of 13 years of service here—the longest ministerial tenure in a half century. In contrast to

the complicated or painful endings of several earlier ministries, his retirement was marked by standing ovations at both his farewell party and his final service.

I need not recount examples of the vitality of our congregation in the present moment.

If you've been around, you've been part of the new and renewed activities for building community, reaching out in service and solidarity, and giving generously to support our mission and extend our impact.

If you are new, we hope you'll hang around, and look around at our opportunities and get to know us, just as we seek to know you.

My dissertation advisor asked me this question. What lessons can any other congregation take from the journey that our congregation has made in the past few decades? Our recent success and vitality can be traced to the attention we give to a clear mission and our loyalty to the congregation's guiding values. Our health comes not from an orientation to task, but an orientation to trust.

Together we have created a web of mutual dependence. We sustain this web of community through spiritual practices of shared support, respect, empathy, generosity and love. The covenant has held us together, the Values have guided us, and the Mission has called us forward. Let us be grateful for the web of love, creativity and courage which continues to hold us together. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> This fall we will start our fourth year of Spiritual Deepening Circles, a newer form of covenant groups.