

Welcome Home!
Big Sky Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Worship Service presented by Bill Kronholm
August 30, 2009

Welcome home!

We usually say something like that when our services resume after the summer, after nearly three months of vacations and outings and long lazy weekends.

But this welcome is special because, of course, we are meeting for the first time at Plymouth Congregational Church, this year a new home for our Big Sky UU fellowship. It's a new experience for all of us, and we probably will be feeling our way for awhile. But for now at least we can say, we're home.

I'm sure many of us had mixed feelings about leaving the Christian Science Church. The folks there are good people, and they were gracious hosts for the several years we stayed there. Our fellowship grew and prospered under their roof. We owe them our thanks, and I know we all will have many pleasant memories of services and pot lucks and fellowship in their building.

But, as Ruth Luke aptly pointed out during the discussion this spring, by this year we were not the same group that they agreed to share their sanctuary with a few years ago. When we started there, we were perhaps two dozen mostly middle-aged adults. There were only a couple of children, and they were nearing their teens. By last spring, we were having 50 to 60 or more people of all ages attending, including perhaps a dozen small children. That was really not the mix the Christian Science folks had agreed to host, and it became clear it was time to move on.

Now, however, it is time to look forward, and that's the purpose of this message today. I

want to discuss how our fellowship is growing and changing, and of obstacles we may face that we should be aware of. One of those obstacles can be change itself.

You see, changing a church home can a difficult time for a church, any church. It can be upsetting. It can be divisive. Churches have been torn apart by this kind of change, even booming, growing churches, flush with members and money.

Let me be clear: I do not see that happening to us. But we need to be aware of the dynamics that may be at work among us. There may be some things simmering below the surface that we do not see or recognize or feel. I hope not, but let us at least discuss what could be there.

To begin with, let's talk about what one UU minister has termed "the fierce ambivalence of change." That's the phrase of Erika Hewitt of the Live Oak UU Congregation in Austin Texas. She puts it this way:

"I know what it's like to lose a beloved and familiar aspect of your spiritual home; to wrestle with emotions of loss and uncertainty, and feel ambivalent – both excited and reluctant – about congregational change. Anything and everything – from a piece of paper, to a piece of music, to the color on the walls – is a potential sacred cow, imbued with meaning and emotion, for someone. Change that one little thing, and it feels like an earthquake has shuddered through the foundation."

By that standard, we have gone through a profound change since this spring. We have let go of one home, an intimate and comfortable sanctuary to which many people were fondly attached. We began a discussion of what our future home would be. Time and circumstance forced us to make at least an interim decision before we could reach true consensus. So this year we will be continuing to explore options. We may move again in another year. Nothing is settled. Nothing is decided.

So despite our joy at having a new home, we recognize that this can still be an unsettled time for us.

In his book *Managing Transitions*, management consultant William Bridges draws the distinction between change and transition.

Change is external. It is the different practice or policy or structure. In our case, it is a new church meeting place. Transition is internal. It is the psychological shift that people go through as they adapt to the change. Bridges argues that it is the latter, the transition, that impacts organizations, not the change itself.

According to Bridges, there are three stages that members of an organization go through as they adapt to change.

The first is saying goodbye to whatever must be given up in order to move toward change. Inevitably, change means giving up some way of doing things, abandoning some practice or tradition. Some people will feel a sense of loss or deprivation, and all of us need to be sensitive to those feelings in others.

The second stage involves moving into a neutral zone of sorts. Even after people are willing to let go of the past, they are not necessarily ready to move into the future. Bridges suggests that the neutral zone is where people can process their feelings and begin to appreciate how a change may have a positive influence on the church and its goals. This is something that cannot be rushed. People have to process their feelings at their own pace, and they must be given time to do so. Some people will move forward quickly, while others will be reluctant to accept the need for change.

The third stage is moving forward into what Bridges calls “the new beginning.” This is where people have worked through their emotions and questions and accepted the change.

But Bridges says that there is a stumbling block here: There are people who will not move to stage three. There are some who will not get past stage one. And this presents a

problem for a church congregation, particularly a small congregation. For while we cherish each member, and while we recognize that moving through these transitional stages will take different times for different people, we also have to say that the congregation as a whole must move forward. It cannot stop in hopes of achieving unanimity, especially the radical notion that UUs could be unanimous about anything! We must move forward.

For our fellowship, there are even more complications.

The first of these is the fact that our move to Plymouth was deliberately accepted as a one-year move during which we would attempt to reach consensus on what our fellowship wants as a long-term home. There are some among us who want a home of our own, even if that means renting some commercial space and modifying it into a sacred space. Some want to buy a building, though the numbers for that don't pencil out given our size and budget. Some are partial to reaching agreement to share space with some church or organization other than Plymouth.

Ideally, we should have had that debate before our move. Ideally, we should have aired our feelings, explored all the options thoroughly, discussed what we wanted both in our hearts and in our minds, and come to consensus. Since we did not have that much time, we opted instead to move to a church that was welcoming and accepting of us, and we pledged that the larger debate would take place this year.

Now I suspect, based on the welcome that Plymouth has extended to us, that over the next several months there may be growing support for staying here beyond our one-year agreement (and we will presume for the moment that Plymouth still feels as welcoming toward us). Still, that is not a given, and it is not a goal, and we will pursue the larger question of a permanent home for Big Sky UU. The Home Exploration Committee will meet in September to begin that process.

But in terms of the stages of transition described by William Bridges, it places us in an unusual position.

Yes, we must move through the three stages of transition for our move to Plymouth.

But in the larger context of a permanent home for Big Sky UU, we are in essence agreeing to remain in Stage Two – the neutral zone – for at least a year. In the larger context, we cannot move to Stage Three – the new beginning – because our change will not be final for another year. We cannot move to Stage Three because, for the long term, we still do not know where we will be.

In our effort to reach consensus in our fellowship, we have agreed to accept uncertainty as a state of being for what could be an unpleasantly long time. And uncertainty is not conducive to harmony.

There is another factor that is not part of our move, but does affect the dynamics of our fellowship. It would have been a factor even if we had stayed at the Christian Science Church. And that is the issue of our growing membership.

As I said earlier, when we first went to the Christian Science Church, we were much smaller. We would hold services with only a handful of people attending; two dozen was considered a big turnout. But as of this spring, we had 52 official members, and we often had 60 or more attending services. This affects our dynamics.

The Rev. Jane Dwinell is a small church specialist within our national Unitarian Universalist Association. She says that church experts tend to lump congregations in four broad categories. Family size is 50 active members or less. Pastoral size is 50 to 150 members; program size is 150 to 350 members; and corporate size is more than 350 members.

So you can see we are on the cusp of moving from a 'family size' congregation to a 'pastoral size' congregation.

In a family-size church, the functions and programs tend to be run by a 'church family.' It is group centered, and there is an intimacy in how programs are run. Everyone knows everyone, and people tend to fall into tasks without a lot of formal organization. You want to do something or make some changes – word goes out, people show up, and it happens. When Joyce and I joined Big Sky UU, Winston Swift was the music man. I don't know that anyone ever appointed him, or that he was chairman of any committee. But he did the music, and no one would have dreamed of starting a choir or arranging some special music without running it by Winston. That's how it works in a family-size church.

But according to Dwinell, when average attendance starts to move past 35 people, the dynamics begin to change, and by the time it passes 50, the family-size church becomes a pastoral-size church. Fifty people is too many for everyone to know everyone intimately. At about this point, Dwinell says, one of two things happens.

The group may decide – unconsciously – to shrink back to its comfort zone. A church grows rapidly – and then, strangely, it begins to shrink. Fewer people show up on Sundays. And the congregation eventually coalesces at a stable, smaller size that forms a new tightly-knit family-size congregation.

The other thing that happens – and it seems to be happening with us – is that the congregation changes its dynamic to deal with its growing size. The congregation moves from being a single group to being many smaller groups, some formal and some informal. The glue that holds them all together is the pastor, or if there is no pastor then the lay leader.

The intimacy of the family-size congregation is replaced by the intimacy of small groups within the congregation – Circle of Eight dinners, book club, the men's group, the knitting group, adult education classes. As long as they overlap and do not become cliques thriving on exclusion, these are good things. And leader-centered congregations can do great

things, as long as the leaders don't burn out. That is a real risk, and it means more people must step forward to take leadership roles, to spread around the responsibility and the burdens.

This transition is an additional complication as we grow, and we should be aware of it.

So where do we go from here, as a fellowship? How do we deal with the complications and challenges that beset our great little community as it becomes not so little?

I'm not the expert, but I'll offer a few suggestions.

The first is that we remember why we're here. We offer a liberal faith alternative for our community, and to each other. We offer a home not just to skeptical Christians, but also to Jews, Buddhists, humanists, agnostics and atheists, all good people who might otherwise have no faith community. We can remember the traditions and principles that brought us together, and we can agree to stand by those principles. We can be active in social justice, and we can volunteer to help lead our fellowship, in areas big and small.

The second thing is that we can remember that each of us is trying to do the right thing. The people that wanted to stay at the Christian Science Church, the people that want to stay here, the people that want to rent some old building or some bright new place and turn it into something special – they all, we all, are trying to do the right thing by our fellowship.

And the third thing we can do is to be nice to each other, to tolerate each other, to listen to one another and respect each other's opinion.

Earlier this year, Joyce and I were going through a little rough patch, where we were both being a little snippy and hurtful to each other. To deal with it, we began something new: We decided to hug each other each morning and tell the other: "Just for today, I am going to be very nice to you." And we were, day after day. We aren't so snippy these days. And we still do this, if not every day then at least several times a week.

I don't think we as a fellowship need to do a big group hug, or even say anything out

loud. But perhaps we can consciously think: "Just for today, I'm going to try to be especially nice to everyone in UU, especially the people I disagree with." A little vow can go a long way.

So we're here, in a new home, which may or may not be a long term home. We still have a lot of decisions to make about our future. And we face some elements of risk, elements that have taken their toll on other congregations, other churches.

I don't think that's going to happen to us. We are still family. We can disagree without being disagreeable. We can talk, and we can listen, and we can think, and we can decide. And ultimately, we can find our way, with joy and fellowship, to the future.

So, in the words of our opening song, Enter, rejoice and come in. For now, at least, you are home.

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