

**“Vision, Mission, Covenant, and Your Main Thing”
The Unitarian Church of Lincoln
February 7, 2016**

“Who are we, as individual Unitarian Universalist
congregations?”

Who are you, within your own community when you gather
on Sunday morning or Saturday afternoon
or Wednesday night, or any of the other times
that you gather?

Who are you, as a religious community?”

New Congregation and Growth Resources, UUA. 2005

Gathering of the Community

Ring of Bell

Welcome and Announcements

Prelude: Medley – “Merry Boys of Greenland/
Ollifiord Jack/Willafiord,”

Trad. Shetland Islands tunes – Terry Keefe

Stating Intent

Chalice Lighting: by G. Woods

Read by LauraLee Woodruff

Opening words: from *Vision, Mission, Covenant:
Creating a Future Together*”

New Congregation and Growth Resources, UUA. 2005

Hymn: #389 “Gathered Here”

Time for all ages

Story:

Children’s Song: #392 “Hineh Mah Tov”

Deepening

Reading: “Why Undertake Vision, Mission,
Covenant Work,”
from *Vision, Mission, Covenant:
Creating a Future Together*,
New Congregation and Growth Resources, UUA. 2005
Musical Interlude: “Lea Riggs,”
Trad. Northumbrian tune
Sermon: “Vision, Mission, Covenant, and
Your Main Thing”
Offering and Offertory: Medley – “The Crested Hens”
(Trad. French tune) and “The Butterfly” (Trad. Irish slip jig)

Returning to Community: the work of the people
Sharing of Joys and Sorrows
Meditation

Integration and Release

Musical Meditation: “St. Anne’s Reel,”
Trad. French Canadian
Closing Hymn: #318 “We Would Be One”
Closing Words/Extinguish the Chalice:

Stating Intent

Chalice Lighting: by G. Woods

Burn brightly, flame of this spiritual community,

Guiding all who share our values

To this religious home of open minds, open hearts, and
hands that are willing to share.

May we together reflect the light of our chalice,

Welcoming and engaging all who wish to live
our Vision and our Mission by our Covenant.

Opening words: from *Vision, Mission, Covenant: Creating a Future Together*, New Congregation and Growth Resources, UUA. 2005

From the earliest days of recorded history in the Western world, there are stories of vision, mission, and covenant as foundational parts of religious community. These stories have been told in song, dance, and language, and they are the story of community — individual stories woven into an intricate collective narrative that shows the identity of the community.

Hymn: #389 “Gathered Here”

Time for all ages

Story:

Children’s Song: #392 “Hineh Mah Tov”

Deepening

Reading: “Why Undertake Vision, Mission, Covenant Work,” from *Vision, Mission, Covenant: Creating a Future Together*, New Congregation and Growth Resources, UUA. 2005

With its richness from the past, vision, mission, and covenant come to life today in the midst of people gathered in religious community. In fact, the genius - and the risk of liberal religion is that each new generation must discover its own understanding of vision, mission, and covenant. There is some truth to the remark that “liberal religion is always only one generation removed from extinction,” because without the valuable work in discovering and creating vision, mission, and covenant, the reasons why our congregations gather can be lost. Because we choose to allow (and to insist upon) individual determination of belief,

we cannot fall back onto historical statements as the reasons why we exist. Rather, the members of each gathered community must determine for themselves the reasons why they continue to exist.

Musical Interlude:

Sermon: “Vision, Mission, Covenant, and Your Main Thing”

When one of my colleagues began her first ministry in a UU church in central Massachusetts, she was aware that the congregation who called her wanted to rebuild its deteriorating building. She asked my favorite question: “Why?” She suggested that they should first decide what their Mission as a congregation in their city could – and, to their minds, should - be. As part of that process, they realized that many of them had a passion for helping the homeless, so they began actively to build housing and create services for the homeless in their community. The congregation grew by leaps and bounds and finally completed the work on their own building, but not before they had become a powerful change agent for the homeless

in their town. This is but one story of a religious community discovering its mission.

When I first considered serving as your Interim Minister here in the Unitarian Church of Lincoln, I was impressed by the Mission statement you developed in 2010, through hard work helmed by Steve Enersen and Pam Wakeman. Here is your mission statement:

Our mission as a welcoming congregation is to inspire a sense of awe, joy and reverence in people of all ages. We actively model an inclusive, sustainable community. We each contribute to the work of the church. We provide a safe haven for free thought. We cultivate growth and celebrate the changes that growth brings. Please join us.

I genuinely appreciate this statement and think it takes you a long way toward acting toward one another in positive, life-affirming ways. I am not certain it is a mission statement, however.

So I wish to explore this particular language with you from work that has been done within the Unitarian

Universalist Association since 1995 when we began the program called “Fulfilling the Promise.” The UUA explored how Vision/Mission/Covenant might guide Unitarian Universalists toward greater understanding of our selves and our place in the world.

These are the working definitions developed over many years of exploration:

Vision:

A carefully defined picture of where the congregation wants to be in five or more years. It is the dream of what the congregation can become.

Mission:

A concise statement of what the congregation wants to be known for, or known as, within the wider world; what the congregation wants to mean to the community.

Covenant:

A statement of how members of the congregation will be with, and will behave toward, one another, as well as what is promised or vowed to one another and to the congregation as a whole.

Now, you do not have to accept those definitions. You operate under the rubric of congregational polity which means you may use your own definitions. I do, however,

think it might be helpful for you to know the definitions used by the majority of congregations currently in the UUA, so you can judge whether you will be understood – or misunderstood.

According to UU language, it is easier to understand *your* mission as a covenant: an eloquent statement of how you wish to behave with one another. You could simply replace the word “mission” with the word “covenant” and have something quite useful in the larger context of UU:

*Our **covenant** as a welcoming congregation is to inspire a sense of awe, joy and reverence in people of all ages. We actively model an inclusive, sustainable community. We each contribute to the work of the church. We provide a safe haven for free thought. We cultivate growth and celebrate the changes that growth brings. Please join us.*

As I questioned the true nature of your mission statement, some of you asserted that “please join us” makes it a mission. I am uncomfortable with that as it could be interpreted, “We will follow this covenant with you if you

join us.” What if a person just wants to hang out for a while, as do many newcomers? And it leads to questions about how a person really comes to belong to this community.

Now I realize that was probably not your intent when this statement was created. I hope you become open to the possibility of this interpretation, as I have heard it from newcomers: good people hesitant to join because it seems difficult to break in to the community

That said, I believe the slogan offered at the beginning of the new website is a beginning of a vision statement: *“We're a caring community uniting reason with spiritual exploration.”* But this also says nothing about how you relate to the city of Lincoln or the state of Nebraska. It lacks context and a call to action for justice. That call usually shows up in UU vision statements, especially if the congregation is in the capital of the state.

The rest of that first statement on the web site is clearly a covenantal statement about how you can expect to engage your spiritual journey within this congregation. I like all of it – and it is more covenantal!

Now, I am not trying to shoot down all of your good work trying to state who you are for the world to see/hear/understand. I do believe you are people of good mind, heart, and intentions, and people inspired by UU values. I just invite you to think about your language and expression of your values to others beyond these walls.

With this in mind, I encourage everyone to engage the process of Cottage Meetings that has worked well in many UU congregations to update and/or create useful Vision/Mission/Covenant Statements. To my mind, your vision, if you are willing to call it that, has a great start. Your Mission is a Covenant, even with the final sentence. The Mission seems to be entirely turned inward, including

inviting people to come inside the community, but does not say how your congregation wants to affect its larger community.

One of the principal and essential pieces of the developmental work of a transition from one fully-settled minister to another is reflection about who a congregation has been, currently is, and what it wishes to do in its world with the new minister. This is described in the training of interim ministers as: “Clarifying Identity: the reality of the present versus the memory of the past” It is generally done under the rubric of “Vision, Mission, Covenant.” You already have some of this done with a partial vision statement and a more than adequate covenant as the current mission statement. But you seem to lack a true mission, unless you simply wish to turn inward, focus only on the existing people, and avoid the larger community. Some of our

congregations do want that – and it is best to announce that if it is so.

So, let us once again look briefly at a definition of Mission that might provide inspiration on the road toward a successful Mission Statement.

Here is a definition of a Mission offered by the UUA:

Mission: A concise statement of what the congregation wants to be known for, or known as, within the wider world; what the congregation wants to mean to the community.

If you consider your current mission statement, it really does not focus what the congregation wants to do within the community.

Several of you have asked me, “What is wrong with focusing inward, on ourselves, and doing that as our mission?” To which I say, that is acceptable in the sense that it makes your true intentions clear: You only want to

relate to those with whom you are already comfortable and connected.

However, it disregards that this congregation holds the franchise for Unitarian Universalism in this town. If you have no interest in transforming the world in keeping with Unitarian Universalist values, maybe you should cede the franchise, become a club, and invite another group to take on a mission of transformation toward UU values.

I would also invite you to consider whether this town needs UU values expressed actively to go forward as a community for the greater good of all. I would like to suggest that you actually have a larger mission among you: a project where the gifts and talents within this already existing congregation meet the needs of the larger community of Lincoln.

The UUA offers this thought:

When done well, the vision, mission, and covenant process captures the people's sense of who they are and who they want to be as a religious community. It is the clearest articulation of why the people think the congregation should exist, and the results can help the congregation in all areas of its decision making. Where should we build our new building? The answer can be found in the congregation's vision. Where should we put our money? And why should we even bother to donate money to the congregation? The answer, you can say, is found in the mission — this is what we have said is most important, so therefore we should focus our money, time, and effort where we said we wanted them to go. How should we treat one another in committee meetings, social gatherings, and the children's time? Once again, the answer can be found in one of the statements you've created — this time the covenant statement. Over and over again, the work and life of the congregation can be tested against the collective will and desire by reference back to the vision, mission, and covenant statements. The reason why most vision, mission, and covenant statements fail is because the congregation fails to plan for their effective implementation.

This is why I also suggest that you go beyond the Mission to focus upon one Main Thing that you want to do for the next five – ten years: one thing that truly manifests the

way in which your unique gifts and talents may serve the larger community of Lincoln. Your Main Thing is just one thing that you need to pursue for at least five years for it to be embedded in the congregational culture.

Then you might explore another Main Thing to be added to the culture of the congregation, but each needs to be a strong reflection of the stated Mission of this congregation. You already have two Main Things that have been going on for years: The C.A. Sorenson Lecture and the Winter Lecture series. You also have the concert series, though many seem unaware of it. Wouldn't it be great to add another Main Thing that engages those who don't feel called to attend lectures or concerts? I sincerely hope you will find such a project where your talents meet the hopes and hurts of Lincoln. In this way all of you share in the creation of a Beloved Community of memory and hope, with respect,

responsibility, and relish for the process. So Be It! Blessed
Be!

Closing Words/Extinguish the Chalice: from V. Emil
Gudmundson

And now, may we have faith in life to do wise planting that
the generation to come may reap even more abundantly
than we. May we be bold in bringing to fruition the golden
dreams of human kinship and justice. This we ask that the
fields of promise become fields of reality.

Concise Definitions

It is always helpful to understand how language is used in a
particular context. . .

Vision:

A carefully defined picture of where the congregation wants
to be in five or more years. It is the dream of what the
congregation can become.

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A concise statement of what the congregation wants to be
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