

UU Fellowship of the Rappahannock  
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## **Sharing Our Faith**

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There is an old Sufi story about Nashrudin, the trickster, and his wealthy neighbor. His neighbor came to see him and said, "Nashrudin, look at you. You're over here dressed in rags and eating nothing but chickpeas and bread. If you would just learn to be subservient to the emperor like I am, you could dress in fine garments and eat lavish feasts."

Nashrudin replied, "Neighbor, if you would just learn to dress in rags and eat chickpeas and bread like I do, you wouldn't have to be subservient to the emperor."

This story makes me think of the three crucial questions the institution of church continually asks itself: Who are we? What are we here for? Who is our neighbor?

Who are we? Are we happy being that, whatever 'that' is? What do we value about our identity? Nashrudin knew who he was, and knew what he valued.

What are we here for? How do our actions serve to fulfill our purpose? Nashrudin's values guided his actions.

Who is our neighbor? With whom do we create the community in which we live? How do we fit into that community? Nashrudin and his

neighbor were very different, but the story indicates that they talked to each other, related to each other.

These three questions will be valuable touchstones for you in the months to come. You are about to embark upon what will likely be the most transformative experience so far in the life of this fellowship by moving into your new building. You can be confident that moving into a building of your own will mean change. Will it mean significant growth? Maybe, maybe not. There are many factors to consider which will affect how much you are likely to grow. Religious exploration, for example, may be less prevalent here than in an urban area. It's likely that people have already made the decision to be Baptist or Episcopalian or United Methodist, or whatever they are, and are satisfied with the family tradition that led to that decision.

Unitarian Universalism tends to attract, as you know, those who value the intellectual pursuit of religious understanding, rather than a more spiritual or emotional approach. Even though, as Joanna Macy says, "humans are more than brains on a stick", we tend to value brains pretty highly as UUs. That intellectual approach, though, is not what everybody is looking for in a church experience.

Another crucial factor to recognize is that in spite of the widely proclaimed myth that America is a classless society, in fact, there *is* still a class system in place in this country. This fellowship consists of some members who have made sound decisions throughout your lives which have led you to be able to retire comfortably along this

beautiful river. That fact in itself will keep the doors shut to poor people, and that's reflective of the larger denomination. Unitarian Universalists nationwide are statistically people with higher than average income. In an urban area, there's a level of anonymity that may diminish that influence somewhat; here, that anonymity is not such a factor. So it's fair to say that although your new building will probably bring about some growth, there are many factors affecting growth that are out of your hands.

I've diverged from the question of identity to go straight into talking about growth, and we're going to get back to identity. In terms of growth, though, the current position in our denomination is that our task is to grow Unitarian Universalism. I confess that I have not heard a lot of conversation that names why we need to grow. It seems that we don't have to talk about that; it's just obvious. We need to grow so that we will be bigger. I, who have never made my living as a businesswoman for many good reasons, experience that as a business perspective rather than a religious perspective. In a conversation years ago, when I was talking about my own congregation and our speculation about seeding a new church if we got much bigger, someone said to me that we are better off with fewer, larger churches rather than many smaller churches. It's a better use of our resources. That may be true, from a business perspective. Or from what I name as a business perspective. I admit, though, that I remain unconvinced.

Brian Blount, the new president of Union-PSCE, spoke in a recent magazine interview about the fact that the Presbyterian church is steadily losing members. In what I thought was a wonderfully refreshing perspective, Rev. Brian said this: “That’s not to say that gaining members is the definition of what God wants us to be called to do. But we’re certainly called to strengthen and enliven the community of the faithful.” (Focus, summer 2008) Will strengthening and enlivening the community of the faithful cause that community to grow? Maybe so. But that’s not the *purpose* of strengthening and enlivening the community of the faithful. The purpose is so that the community will be stronger and more lively, maybe with more people, maybe with a diminished number of people. My hope is that you will keep Rev. Brian’s perspective in mind with every decision you make about the fellowship, and you will ask each other in your discernment process, “How will the outcome of this decision strengthen and enliven this fellowship and Unitarian Universalism?”

One more point to consider about growth: in my experience, and you all probably know this better than larger churches, the work of the church gets done effectively because of effective and solid relationships. People don’t serve on committees because the work by itself is particularly compelling, but because the relationships with the others on the committee are rewarding. One thing I learned as a director of faith development is that most people don’t teach religious education because they feel compelled to leave the service on Sunday mornings and go to another place. And, they don’t teach because a staff member asks them to. They teach primarily because

their friends ask them to. The most successful way to recruit people for any endeavor is to ask your friends to do it with you, and one of the most satisfying things about teaching, or any other committee work, is that you're involved with your friends. In a larger congregation, those relationships aren't necessarily evenly diffused throughout the group. In a small fellowship, the relational element tends to be stronger, and those relationships have such a powerful impact on the spirit with which the everyday work gets done.

Now let's go back to the question of identity, which is going to be a crucial question for you in the months to come. Edward A. White is a consultant at the Alban Institute, which is an ecumenical organization that offers information, consultation, and resources to congregations of all denominations, and he makes this very important, identity-related point: congregations are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. In the mainline Christian denominations, this may be an easier point to engage, because they have the established language for discussion that we do not have as UUs. Devoted members of Christian churches would say that churches exist to bring God's kingdom to this world now, as the Lord's Prayer says: "thy kingdom come on earth." The kingdom will come because we human spirits create it, to the best of our ability. In UU language, we may say that the purpose of our congregations is to bring justice and peace to the world, to the best of our ability. However we name it, we understand when we think seriously about it that a congregation truly is not an end in itself, but rather a means to an end. A congregation is more than a place to go to feel better, to

get stimulated intellectually, to see your friends and share food. A private club can meet those needs. Once we take on the identity of a congregation and name ourselves Unitarian Universalists, we have a responsibility out in the world. We have a responsibility to serve the world, to serve the good. A responsibility to bring justice, equity, and compassion to the community in which we live.

Now here's what happened at my own church during the time we were building our building...we were obliged to spend our time focused inward, attending to our own needs in the monumental task of buying land and building a home for ourselves. We could not have been successful building our own place without that inward focus. Then once the building was open and in use, there was a whole new set of obligations and tasks that required our attention. All of that kept our attention focused inward, and it's understandable that the creation of one's own place, which goes on for so long, makes that inward focus become an accustomed perspective. Thus a congregation has to be intentional about noticing and naming together the need, when the time is right, to shift the focus outward and start serving the world. You are at the beginning of that adventure now. What will you do?

The good news, and maybe the intimidating news, is that it's up to you. We operate with congregational polity; neither the denomination nor the district is going to tell you how to serve the world. It will be up to you to decide. Those reliable three questions can guide you.

*Who are we?*

What resources do we want to offer, realistically, in terms of space, volunteer commitment, time, and financial support?

*What are we here for?*

What does it mean to be Unitarian Universalists in the Northern Neck? How do we want people to know us? In what ways can we serve? How can we bring justice, equity, and compassion to our neighbors?

*Who is our neighbor?*

Who lives around us? What are their needs that we can meet, given who we are? We aren't asking what do we want to do, but rather what needs are here that we can meet. Where can we enter the community to do good?

Each of these questions gives rise to lots of sub-questions, and the process of discernment will take a lot of time and intention. Within the framework of these three questions, and with the understanding that you're not asking what do we want, but rather what are the needs of our neighbors, you will create some way of letting your neighbors know who you are. Your neighbors will know you by your service, and they will know you as you stand for them in the name of justice, equity, and compassion.

And so may it be.