

Sermon The Planting for website
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Delivered April 3, 2016, First Unitarian Universalist Society of Middleborough
A Family Service

This is going to sound like an odd message on the Sunday we're kicking off our annual pledge drive. We are feeling pretty positive these days with our accomplishments. We've got momentum and want to keep it going. We're creating warm, inviting space of excellent quality that's bright and secure and flexible enough to meet the varied needs of this beloved community. This is wonderful and I salute you.

Now, it's time to focus on why. Why we have done this great work. It is not to create warm, inviting, bright spaces. It's about our reasons for being here. I want us to start thinking less about maintaining this church and more about transforming this people. I'm asking you to continue to strive for the highest quality of church we can muster, but don't confuse excellence with our end goal. Our end goal is how we transform ourselves and transform the world around us. Excellence will help us; and strengthen our resolve to get there.

A couple of times a year, I ask you "Why are you here?" Your answers run a delightful gamut:
"I like seeing my friends"
"I'm basically here for my kids"
"I want to be with like-minded people; I feel isolated in this community."

Sometimes you say:
"I want to do something important" or "I want to be part of something meaningful."
"I don't have any other space to be a spiritual person in my life."
"I need Sunday morning to completely different from everything else I do during the week."
"I'm not much of a joiner but I like the services."
"I really want to get involved."
"I like the music."
"I like the silence after prayer."

Sometimes you say:
"I need healing. I am a refugee from (fill in the blank)"
More often you say:
"I need purpose. I need to feel useful."

In case you haven't figured it out already, the way you answer the question "why am I here" is often related to where you are in life. Your age
Working full time
Raising kids, and their ages
Experienced at church or unchurched.
Looking for friends, or having friends.
Connected to your community or not so connected.
Leaning toward the secular or leaning toward the spiritual or leaning toward the philosophical.
Early riser or prefer to sleep in.

Think about how church fits into our lives.

For some, it's a spiritual haven, a home. It's where they meet friends and socialize. They join committees and consider themselves the glue that holds things together. They're inwardly focused.

For others, it's a home base. They've got their own friends.

What they want is a community to support their interests. They're outwardly focused.

For some it's where they plant roots. To have security and stability.

For others is where they plant seeds. In the wider world. To experiment and be challenged to do new things.

For some it's a place to belong.

For others it's a place to be changed.

We need a balance. Some years we can and should be more about planting roots, and some years we can and should be about planting seeds. Our goals can be about learning, and failing and learning from that as well.

Thomas Bandy book *Kicking Habits* demands we think about church in a new light. He wants us to think of church only in the new light; to de-institutionalize faith, to use an old bureaucratic phrase. He says, if a church wants to grow, it has to stop acting like a conventional church.

He describes a church in decline, and how it welcomes a new couple:

1. Bob and Sally are welcomed, not to address their own needs, but to address the institutional needs of the church.
2. Bob and Sally are nurtured, not to discover their own faith, gifts, and calling, but to understand and contribute to the organization.
3. Bob and Sally are encouraged, not to probe the boundaries of creativity, but to accept the friendly consensus of the bureaucracy.
4. Bob and Sally are trained, not to do ministry, but to raise money and manage an institution that will pay and supervise somebody else to do ministry.
5. Bob and Sally are devoted, not to welcoming people, but to keeping people; their priority is not to care for the world, but to take care of each other.

In short, the declining church assumes that Bob and Sally will find meaning and purpose in life through "belonging" to the church; and that preserving the institutional church so that others can "belong" to it in the future is their most important task. (p. 69)

I think Bandy may have a little telescopic vision when it comes to traditional church, but he may have a point.

I interviewed Rev. Jim Robinson a couple of weeks ago.

Rev. Robinson has helped to grow two congregations, one in Brewster and one in Sharon.

I asked him what strategy he thought was key to their success.

His response was interesting.

He said that they made sure they talked to newcomers

to find out what those newcomers wanted to *do*. Not what they wanted, what they wanted to do.

Then his church went about trying to help them do it.

It might be a new small group, it might be a community project.

Whatever it was, his congregation was prepared to try it. Their attitude is:

Let's not say no, that doesn't fit this church; let's say "We'll try it and see what happens."

Even if it didn't succeed, it was still worthwhile.

And people tended to stay when they saw such interest and commitment.

Do we want to plant roots or plant seeds? Guess what, both are needed!

We can strive for excellence, but don't mistake excellence as our end goal.

We need to nourish people for the task of living well and dying well.

We need to nourish people for the task of changing themselves.

We need to nourish people for the task of changing the world.

Never forget that our communities, our country,

is in great need of our message that, above all else, we must stand on the side of love.

So, if we are going to provide a home, and a home base,
what does that mean for us as one congregation?
Embrace what each is looking for. Don't neglect one for the other.
And above all, How do we carry our message out there,
instead of only sharing our message with folks who find us in here?

I charge you to bring back to us the things that you care deeply about, the things you have found transformational, the things you've been dying to do, and to have some company in the doing of it.

Not why are you here, but:
Who do you want to be?
What do you want to be?
What do you want to change?
Where do you want to be effective?
How can we help you be that? Do that?

This congregation is unique in our lives.
Take from us that which will nourish you.
Give to us what will nourish others.

Let us be a home.
Let us be a home base.
Let us plant roots.
Let us plant seeds.
Let us belong.
Let us be changed.

May it always be so.