

**Our Is No Caravan Of Despair:
Unitarian Universalism Meets the Challenges of the 21st Century
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St. Lawrence/Ohio Meadville District Assembly
Rev. Priscilla Richter, Schenectady, NY**

Upon my return from my sabbatical in June, 2012, I read in our local news that the First Presbyterian Church of Gloversville was holding its final service before it closed for good. Since I had been studying the well documented decline of religious institutions for a couple of years, with more intense study during my sabbatical, I decided to attend this service to bear witness to the tragedy of dying congregations.

It was one of those perfectly beautiful June Sunday afternoons when I drove to Gloversville. First Presbyterian Church was located at one of the main intersections downtown, an imposing gothic-style church that took up a chunk of the block. Even though I was early, I found one of the last seats in the overflow section in the back of the church. Clearly, many more people were in attendance at this service than had been attending for the past few years. Denominational officials were present. They along with the current minister led the service. The organ belted out the hymns, and thankfully it was not a somber affair. The message was one of hope -- this is not a final death -- all the good work that this church embodied for a century and a half would live on in many ways. Their faith will live on as members, like yeast, would leaven other congregations. A very touching part of the service was the giving of gifts to area congregations: a rural church was the recipient of the hymnals. Another church was gifted with the baptismal font. Kitchen stuff went to another struggling rural church. And their beloved food pantry, their pride in the community, was transferred to the neighboring United Church of Christ. The service was full of hope -- but we were unmistakably present for a sad transition, one that is repeated regularly throughout our land. It really struck me that this congregation was founded 150 years before, in the midst of the Civil War. I thought about a congregation born in a time of despair when families were sending their young sons off to such a tragic war -- I thought of the hope embodied in that founding. And now dying in the midst of massive cultural change. It was painful to bear witness to a phenomenon that is disconcertingly real in these times.

Afterwards, I walked outside around this very large church: it was clear that quite a bit of maintenance had been deferred. And though downtown Gloversville has its attractive parts, it's clear that Gloversville has been suffering its own downturn for some time now.

Closer to home, two nearby congregations have suffered a similar fate in the past year, in neighborhoods that are not in decline: our closest neighbor, Union Presbyterian Church, has disbanded and sold its building to an African American congregation. And a Lutheran Church has joined with another congregation, its building now for sale.

We are in the midst of massive cultural transformation. We are in the mist of great economic dislocation. Add in population demographic changes, generational differences,

and a whole host of other factors interlacing with one another, this complex of events is affecting every institution – including religious ones.

Several years ago, my inner sociologist began to study these issues in earnest. There's a whole lot that has been written on all of this, and new stuff is coming out everyday, fed by rapid communication that the internet and social media bring. I do not put myself out here as an expert: I'm sharing with you what I've found along the way.

This transformation has been going on for a number of years, but the impact on religious institutions has been accelerating. And sadly, it's not 'those other churches' that are suffering, it's all of us. Mainline Protestants. Mega churches. Evangelicals. Jewish congregations of all kinds. We Unitarian Universalists are remaining nearly flat. This past year we declined by a bit over 1%. Not bad, you say, compared to others, but we are a very small denomination. The more problematic statistic for me is that our religious education programs are taking a larger hit – declining for the past several years, this past year by almost 5%. This number shows that we, like other religious institutions, are stumbling when it comes to attracting young people.

We have congregations that are thriving and growing. So do other religious institutions. We need to understand what they are doing well to avoid decline in those that are not thriving. I've done some back-of-the-envelope calculations on our two districts: St. Lawrence has 35 congregations, Ohio Meadville 41. In each of our districts, almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of our congregations number under 150 members, which for a long time has been the standard threshold of a congregation's ability to afford full time ministry. A more frightening reality: in St. Lawrence, 40% of our congregations number under 50 members, 34% with less than 50 members in Ohio Meadville. I have no problem with small congregations – but the margin of error is smaller for a crisis, especially if the congregation is aging with few families coming in.

When I talk to Unitarian Universalists about this whole complex issue, I often hear denial. It's those mainstream Christian churches that are dying. Not us. We are more hip and with it. But in many of our congregations, our worship styles and governance styles, not to mention many of our buildings, are as hide-bound as many of 'those other churches' that seem to be dying off. In other words, we need to pay attention.

I spent pretty much every week of my sabbatical visiting different types of congregations, UU and other, in many formats. I attended a house church in Tucson that attracts people in the social justice community; a once-prominent First Baptist Church that is graying and dying in a southern town – even though they have an outstanding minister and has long been 'the church' in their town; a few evangelical churches, one attracting primarily young people, another a classic mega-church, and another new-style one that attracts people across generational lines – and none of these were like your stereotype of an evangelical church; I spent a weekend at a conference with 500 evangelical young adults – I was one of a bare handful of over 50's – I really did not know what I was signing up for – and it was an amazing experience. They were committed to justice and living a larger love in the world. Some were openly gay, most I talked to were socially liberal. And they welcomed me into their small groups. The world is changing. I attended small, medium,

and large UU congregations. Plus I spent a month at a liberal Catholic retreat center. A lot is going on out there. The religious landscape in our country is vast, with seemingly endless choices.

I want to share with you some of the current realities that we need to understand:

1. Fewer church-goers: for many years, the percentage of Americans who regularly attend church has declined (I'm using the word 'church' as shorthand, but I am referring to religious institutions in general). For our younger generations, this means that many do not have any experience with churches. Which means that they have little reason to want to seek a church, as this is outside of their experience. In the past several years, I can't tell you how many new members, in their conversations with me, say, 'I can't believe I'm actually joining a church!'

Younger generations growing up in a fast moving technological landscape, seem to be avoiding institutions in general. Their ways of connecting are more fluid and interactive. We have a hard time taking in this new reality: we still expect that our young people will be returning to us when they begin to have children, but this is not happening – not for us or other religious institutions. For the past several decades, maybe even longer, we have worked on the model that people come to us when they are looking for a church. The message today is, there aren't a lot of people out there looking for a church! And since people have this tendency to age and then die, not attracting younger people can be a huge problem down the line.

2. What younger generations are looking for: Here's some better news: younger people tend to be more liberal, open, and accepting of differences. Studies and polls have been showing that many see themselves as being spiritual, and seek places that are more open to various paths. Many are seeking to live more authentically in this materialistic world. This is indeed good news for Unitarian Universalism – the only thing is, they do not seek this in institutions.

And there's this: younger generations that do not have life experience with churches also have nothing to rebel against, unlike many who have come through our doors in the past several decades. Our openness and other core values, like standing on the side of love, are right for our times. We have the right stuff to enable people to grow into their spiritual path in a safe and loving community – think the bowl of our chalice containing the flame of spiritual growth.

3. Institutions are difficult to maintain. They take enormous resources at a time when people don't have time, money, or energy to put into this. Many of our buildings are beautiful but old structures that take a lot of maintenance. Some say that some congregations are one major building mishap away from demise. Indeed that has been my experience in most of the church closings I've seen firsthand. But institutional maintenance is more than just about the building. For many decades, this has been a main activity of governance bodies. I remember when I was asked to become a member of my first UU congregation in the early 80s: I was told that the benefits of membership were

that I could vote at meetings (which seemed to only happen once a year) and join committees – which one did I wish to join?! Institutional maintenance is not what people today want in a church. Also: with new financial realities, resources to maintain the institution are more scarce, and the outlook does not look rosy that we will anytime soon be able to return to where we were before 2008.

4. The problem with Sunday: Most of us hold our services on Sunday mornings – and if you haven't noticed, religion has lost the battle for Sunday mornings. I'm amazed at the numbers of our members who have to work on Sundays – that used to be rare. Sports, clubs, arts – all kinds of events happen on Sunday mornings now. Our Schenectady Green Market, a most popular year-round venue, operates on Sunday mornings. I make a 50 mile round trip to a year round farmers market that still meets on Saturdays. Among the fewer people looking for church, there's still a lot of competition for Sunday morning, even if it's precious I-don't-have-to-leave-the-house-this-morning time. Bottom line is, we expect people to enter our doors at the time that we designate.

I was pleased to hear that our professional association for religious educators, LREDA, began to address this issue at their fall annual meeting: They are beginning a program called Full Week Faith, knowing that to move into the future, we cannot assume that people are only interested in religious education on Sunday mornings, but need to occur at other times as well. They are looking to create opportunities for families to be engaged more than just Sunday mornings. They are looking into FB groups, or parenting groups, or programs that involve spiritual growth for families at a time other than Sunday mornings.

5. Beyond our Walls: More people are wanting to put their faith in action beyond the walls of institutions to meet their spiritual yearnings. These include many possibilities, such as meet-ups in the community. Many believe that to attract people who aren't coming to church, we need to make connections outside of our walls rather than expecting people to come to us – finding those whom some call Free range uu's.

Going beyond our walls can also reflect new directions in how we do service or justice projects in the community -- not just a fix here and there, like an occasional Saturday at the soup kitchen, but working along side groups and individuals in the community to make a longer term difference. More on this later.

So we have some tensions here – Unitarian Universalists have a faith that is attractive to many, but they aren't beating down our doors. We have institutions to maintain, and we are struggling in our new realities to do so. Always, in our congregations, the sick must be visited; the children must be taught; the rituals must be performed and the holy must be celebrated each week.

We are a faith based on congregational polity: if it doesn't happen in a congregation, it's not UU. We are not geared to looking beyond our walls.

So what can we do? All of this sounds daunting and overwhelming. My experience is that it's easier for congregations to plow ahead as we've always done, as it's hard to figure out how to get a handle on all of this.

It's clear that no one has a roadmap as to what churches can do to attract the people we want to attract. We are all wandering in the unknown. All religious institutions today are like Moses' rag tag band of Israelites who, having escaped from slavery in Egypt, wandered, seemingly lost, in the wilderness. But hopefully it will not take us 40 years! I come down on the side of hope: ours is no caravan of despair. We have a great faith that lends itself to being right for our times – as it has been through several centuries.

Some of the churches I visited were experimenting with new styles and activities. Only time will tell what seems to be working now, and what might need to be tweaked or eliminated tomorrow. A decade ago, churches thought they had 'the' answer: do contemporary worship, which basically meant, hire a rock band. That turned out to not be *the* answer. They alienated their base, many often sacrificed quality for the fact of having a rock band,** and they did not achieve the results they were looking for. Now, many congregations have a quality contemporary worship alongside more traditional worship – and often at non-traditional times. But more importantly, it's clear that there is no one play book to adopt.

In giving you some ideas of where to go and what to do, let me first say that, in the confines of what I can do here tonight, I'm not going to talk about generational differences. I'm not going to talk about governance or mission or stewardship or the importance of social media – not to say these are not important, they are. There are lots of resources for these. I'm not going to talk about growth strategies. We have a lot of small congregations, and *there is nothing wrong with small churches*. But small churches are going to need to find creative ways to maintain buildings and stay together, as the margin of error is smaller. But smaller congregations can also be more flexible and resilient. I give you suggestions based on my study and experience, for which you don't need money you don't have:

I'll begin with some strategies to take you beyond your walls by describing some new ventures in our UU Universe:

In Vancouver and other places, congregations began Pub Theology: meet-ups in pubs where contemporary issues in theology are discussed – anyone can come. In Newark Delaware, the minister of the UU congregation partners with a Presbyterian minister to do this. Venues other than pubs would work for this too. Some young seminarians and ministers in the San Francisco Bay area have begun the Beloved Café: a coffee shop that is not about caffeinating the masses and make a lot of money – it's about forming a base for a community centered around Unitarian Universalist values.

One young minister of a congregation in Houston, TX every Friday afternoon, sits at a table in a nearby Starbucks. She wears a clerical collar *and* her rainbow pin. St. Arbucks, she calls this. Lots of young people seek her out to talk to her – what kind of minister is a

woman who wears a rainbow pin??? And in the greater Tulsa area, one UU minister has set up his mission in a very poor and neglected area – his church people are mainly living in that community and they have made parks, a food pantry, and are a daily presence there. Their building is more of a community center than a church. This is what some call *missional* church – with the mission of ‘loving the hell out of the world’.

Another way is to get out in your community – maybe beginning with the neighborhood where your congregation is located. Many of us are more suburban, and we assume that there are few needs there. I attended a workshop last year at General Assembly, where we were asked to get into small groups and describe the needs of our neighborhoods.

So in our small group: the first person who spoke said that the church was in a middle class neighborhood, but a few miles away, there was a neighborhood with real needs – a poor neighborhood. The second person said essentially the same thing. And so did I.

As we reconvened as a whole, the leaders asked for a report-back from a couple of groups. The first person at the microphone said essentially what we said in my group. But someone from the audience got up and reminded us that there were real needs in our middle class neighborhoods: addictions. Domestic violence. Financial woes. Mental illness. Alienated adolescents. Bullying. Children home alone after school--she had a whole list. Not that one congregation could fix these issues, but could be that neighborhood place where people knew that they could depend on care, offering support, or maybe recovery groups -- a place where, say, middle school kids could go after school. Or you might want to invite neighbors to a dinner, to get to know one another and see what common goals you might have. There may be opportunities to partner with people in your neighborhood, and you could be more than that mysterious building in the midst of your neighborhood.

Or maybe you already have partnerships with organizations with your community. Keep them active and thriving. It’s worth noting that our notions on how we do justice and service in our communities has shifted to a partnership model – that we partner with existing or emerging community organizations to work together.

Here’s something different: you may encourage grass roots efforts from your congregation. One congregation’s board has an application process for those who want to start a new initiative. At least 5 people need to be on board with any application. The project needs to be well thought out, as with any grant proposal. They need to specify how much, if any, money is needed. They need to show how their project is related to the church’s mission. The board vets and makes decisions on proposals, and holds accountable the groups whose proposals are accepted. Groups need to reapply each year, with the same criteria. This process has resulted in many great projects, many in their wider communities.

As the 13th century mystic Rumi said, there are a thousand ways to kneel and kiss the ground. There are a thousand ways to reach out in your communities.

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I will now talk about some things that you can do within your congregation:

Partnerships: In these times, lay leaders, clergy, and staff need to work in partnership to serve your congregational mission – not in competition with one another. This is shared ministry that works.

Partnership also works between and among congregations. Many of us have moved or are moving into geographic clusters, finding ways to work together. The ‘lone ranger’ congregation is a relic of the past. We need to partner with our neighboring UU congregations – work with one another on outreach to those who would be interested in our congregations, coming together to work in the larger community, and to share some of our resources and expertise. Our congregations in the Capital Region of NY, CRUUNY, have worked together now for almost a decade. Presidents and ministers gather once a month. Annually we have a very popular joint worship, we have done service projects together, we advertise on public radio, and we have bonded in important ways. Our congregations have been strengthened tremendously by our work together.

And now a sensitive issue: How accepting are we, really in our congregations? Mainly I want to address how accepting – or not --we are of different spiritual paths. We seriously need to let go of our tensions among our varied theologies. Theists or Christians or pagans vs. humanists or atheists or agnostics, etc. These old arguments not only go against the tide of increasing pluralism, multiculturalism, and a broadening social acceptance of differences, particularly among younger people today. But more important, they go against our own deeply held principles. Unitarian Universalists are the ones who first built religious tolerance into the very fabric of who we are.

I experienced one of those deeply transformative moments this past summer in Transylvania, as several of us embarked on the Unitarian History tour and visit to our partner church. On the outskirts of Deva, we had just taken a funicular up this steep mountainside to the top where the castle ruins and fortress prison lie, the very prison where Ferenc David died. David, of course, was the Reformer who brought not only Unitarian theology to Transylvania, now part of Romania, but through his efforts with the King, young John Sigismund in 1568, the Edict of Torda was passed, bringing religious tolerance to the country. This was the first such edict that gave people the right to practice their religion of choice, rather than being coerced into practicing the religion of their ruler. The young king died tragically, and David was imprisoned and later died there. Although this prison area was not open to the public, our Unitarian tour leader had the key to that area. Standing in that very cell where David died – windowless and dank and claustrophobic, the power of our centuries-old commitment to religious tolerance was palpable. I was overwhelmed with tears, and at a much deeper level understood the huge need to stand up for religious tolerance. We still live in a world where different religious beliefs are fodder for terror and war. And it *kills* me to hear a lack of tolerance in our own congregations – it’s way past time to put to rest our old theist/humanist arguments, or variants thereof. We are both, we are many, we are one. *Our forbears died for this* – it is our imperative to find ways to embrace this kind of radical acceptance in our

congregations, in the spirit of love. Younger generations, especially those who did not grow up in a church environment, do not understand our tensions around spirituality and theological differences.

And yes this is hard for us, since it's been going on for over 100 years now. There's something in human nature that wants people around us reflecting our own beliefs. But we are called to something more. Isn't it finally time to put these to rest? We need to authentically live our faith rather than just preaching it.

Now I want to talk about *Resilience*: When I returned from my sabbatical and was gushing to some of my colleagues about what I found from my study and field work, one asked me this question: What is the one main thing that our congregations need? What would turn this tide? My one word answer was, *resilience*. This colleague did a polite equivalent of rolling her eyes. She was expecting, I believe, a formula, a program, a technical fix. Which no one has yet found.

So what do I mean when I say, we need resilience? It means being in the flow, sensing when the flow is changing and requiring something more of us, and not being afraid of moving into the flow. Resilience is when *you've broken your vows a thousand times*, and you pick yourself up and bring yourself back to what you feel you must do to move forward.

We need to be comfortable with making mistakes and learning from them. Resilience requires the kind of community that we have always dreamed of being – one that is open and loving with one another. Forgiving. And ready to meet challenges with the strength of one another. In other words, being that resilient interdependent web that knows that it is never fixed, never static, and never has all the answers. It evolves in the spirit of love and hope. It lives the great principles at the core of our UU faith. It knows that, right now, we are all caterpillars moving into the cocoon knowing that something is drastically changing – we are scared, not yet knowing that we will become butterflies. We need the resilience that all of this requires.

We need to be reminded that we are the bearers of a resilient faith that has survived many great challenges to our religion. For instance, when Darwin shook up the world with his theories of evolution and natural selection, we rolled with the punches and found ways for our faith to include new truths. That is one of our core values – that new truth is always dawning on some horizon. Our faith is a resilient one, not adapting to every new trend, but in discerning what new truths, new changes might mean as we bring our principles forward to meet the day.

We are facing a time when new truth is not only dawning, it is full sun in our faces. We need to practice resilience because, as we move forward, as we bring on new ways of being church, we will have failures. We will find that some ways won't work. Moving forward from this to evaluate what was not working, learning from that, and trying something else, is resilience in practice.

Lastly, and maybe most important: be passionate about your UU faith and your congregation. The congregations that I visited that were most exciting to me were those that embodied this kind of passion – it was like an electric current that flowed through their space and their worship. Hospitality was remarkable in these places, from the moment I entered the parking lot to the time I departed. It did not feel like a show or that they were following a scripted 5 steps to welcoming a visitor. It felt like a genuine sharing of their love for their faith and congregation – and not only by the people who staffed the visitor table. So cultivate your passion. How do you articulate what Unitarian Universalism means to you? What do you love the most about your congregation? How has your life been transformed by being a part of Unitarian Universalism? Everyone has a story – many of them are salvific. We have that kind of faith that changes lives. But in some of our congregations, one would never know this when first walking into your doors. One word of caution: this is not the same as pouncing on newcomers and regaling them with tales of your wonderfulness. That Southern Baptist church that was graying and dying that I visited? They were so delighted to have a (ahem) younger visitor that, after the service, they pounced on me like goldfish on fish food. This was not passion, this was desperation. Know the difference.

I've brought forth some common themes here: the need to reach out to people who are out there who want and need what we have, and going beyond our walls – while at the same time maintaining our institutions. We need both. Another common theme is partnership – out in the community; among ourselves – clergy, lay, and staff; and with other UU congregations whether in clusters, districts, or regions. We need resilience and passion.

We are no caravan of despair! We have a faith that has evolved through centuries of change and our principles and purposes reflect timeless values that can withstand any storm. Our core message of love and hope, of acceptance, freedom and justice, is transformational and so needed in this world. We are people of hope – but not if we sit back and do nothing. We need to ask and address with one another: what vital possibilities exist in this exciting, chaotic time? How can we reframe our ministries, how can we strengthen our communities to live out our faith, our hope, and our love, to survive all of these changes?

May we move boldly into the unknown, knowing deep in our hearts that we have the faith and strength and love that will see us through.

May we evolve through these times, strengthened, healthy, and whole.