The Commons

Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Spring 2015

THE COMMONS AND THE COMMON GOOD

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The Commons

BY TIM RANSOM

When the time came in 2010 to consider a name for the enlarged foyer of our building, the Olympia Unitarian Universalist Church, we were stymied at first. Beautifully lit by floor to ceiling windows and skylights and sporting the spacious, clean lines that come from light wood posts and beams, the new room was built as an extension of the existing entrance to the church.

That space, comparatively cramped and dark, had been "the foyer" for years, and the one thing everyone agreed upon is that we were overjoyed to put those years behind us. Probably never big enough to start with, in the last few years that small space had been the scene of a constant crush of bodies as members and friends of the growing congregation moved back and forth between sanctuary and kitchen, classrooms and church offices before, during and after services.

At least two things had become all but impossible: preventing coffee spills due to frequent bodily contact and polite, or even good, conversation. And heaven help you if you were a visitor or newcomer in need of the special attention that is so critical to bonding with a new church and a new group of people!

So when the Building Transition Team contemplated a name for the newly enlarged room and entrance to the church, we knew we needed one that promised the kind of experience and the kind of place that we wanted our church to be. Somewhere, during coffee hour, where you could pay less attention to your elbows and more to the folks you are chatting with in one of the small groups we envisioned would be dotted about the big room. Somewhere where you could check out a display from the Social Justice Team or the Green Sanctuary Committee or the Partner Church Committee and talk with a member about issues of the day. And somewhere that would greet new arrivals with the promise of warm friendship, exciting opportunities to get involved in making the world a better place and a bold statement of our forest location reflecting the interconnected web of all existence. All of that needed a special name.

It is unclear who actually suggested “The Commons”, but after reflecting a bit, it became obvious that it was the right name. Most of us UUs had a general notion of what a classical "commons" was and the embedded concepts resonated with us: something shared and for everyone's use where important matters could be discussed and decisions made. I suspect that few of us, though, knew that the right of people to fulfill their basic needs by use of the commons was affirmed by that 13th Century founding document of Anglo-American democracy, the Magna Carta.

In the ensuing eight hundred years the battle between "the public good" ("this public passion must be superior to all private passions.” *John Adams*) and private enterprise, even the capitalistic system, has captivated much of our politics, literature and even theological concerns. Even fewer probably remembered Garrett Hardin's case, presented in his 1968 article in Science magazine entitled "The Tragedy of the Commons," that the concept of the commons is doomed by human nature: "Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit—in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all."

Hardin's depressing thesis stimulated hot debate both 45 years ago and ever since about the inevitableness of "man's" self interest (and the resulting doom of overpopulation of the planet). The arguments go to the very nature of humankind: are we doomed to repeat our mistakes, or our genetic mandates, or can we rise above older, previously effective ways of doing things to imagine and undertake solutions to the problems of our society, our world?

It was in this sense, I think, that we settled on the name, The Commons, for our new room and, more recently, for the title of this new publication. The folks who contribute to the group, On The Commons as part of a "commons movement strategy" perhaps have expressed it best: "We believe it is possible to remember, imagine, and create a society that goes beyond the constructs and confines of individual ownership. To work on the commons is to work to enliven the deep and ancient memory we all hold of egalitarian and reciprocal relationship, of belonging, of authentic community, and love, wonder, and respect for the natural world." Our hopes for the new room, and this publication, are that we bring that "ancient memory" to the fore so that it informs our very existence. We hope you will share and enjoy. ✦

Tim Ransom
Tim has served OUUC in many capacities. He is a professional photographer and writer with a passion for social justice.

The Commons—More Than a Place

BY THE REV. CAROL MCKINLEY

"The ancient memory." Tim Ransom, in his article in this magazine uses this phrase. It reminds us that individually and as a religious community we possess a quality that is embedded in us. This memory is part of what makes us human: a deep awareness of our connectedness to past and future that brings us together into community.

Because a community is vital to our well-being, it requires constant attention to nurture and sustain it. This need to sustain community led the land-holding barons in old England to create a village common. Although the landowner's workers could build houses for families, the land itself belonged to the nobleman. Yet the worker needed access to land to graze the family cattle and to cut hay in order to feed the animals. The landowner set aside a parcel of land—the common—for use by his villagers. The common came out of the understanding that some portion of grazing land, forests, or water resources needed to be available to all if the community was to be sustained.

The oldest city park in the United States, the Boston Common, began as a village common. It was used by colonial families as a cow pasture until overgrazing led to the banning of cattle in 1830. It was transformed into a public park for diverse uses—concerts, a children's playground, ice skating, festivals, even political protests. The Boston Common became the place where the community could find rest and recreation, and come together to protest the country's participation in a war or to celebrate the 2013 Red Sox World Series title.

This expanded understanding of the common has left a legacy: city, state, and national parks; public lands that provide timber and mineral resources; grazing land for cattle; or recreation for people who want to reconnect with nature. Commons today are understood as the spaces, both natural and cultural, available to all members of the community.

In this digital age the concept of the commons has moved beyond a physical place. Who among us hasn't used Wikipedia—that on-line resource that provides information and in turn is expanded by users who contribute even more information? On a smaller scale, Princeton Theology Commons is a digital library of 80,000 resources on theology and religion available to everyone with the push of the Enter key. No longer are these resources available only to an elite with access to institutions of learning; they are now part of the commons.

We can extend our understanding of Commons to include our civic landscape—a landscape that holds the structures and relationships we find necessary to make our world work not just for us, but for everyone.

The Commons is more than a space; it can represent how each of us can move from our individual lives into the larger world recognizing our role and responsibility in that interdependent web of life.

OUUC's Commons is a part of this civic landscape; for many of us who are members of this congregation, it is an important part. We may not graze cattle here, but we do gather to share coffee and food, learn about activities in the church and the community, and get to know each other.

But the OUUC Commons is not only a place where people gather. It is the place, both in actuality and metaphorically, where our personal lives and our lives as a religious community come together and where we learn how our lives figure into that interdependent web of which we are a part. The Commons is a place where we broaden our awareness of living our faith in the world and where we can nurture our ability to build the common good.

The common good was central to the faith and activism of the outspoken 19th Century Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker. He believed that striving for the common good was the purpose of religion; it is what all people of faith are called to do. In one sermon he wrote, "If there be a public sin in the land, if a lie invade the state, it is for the church to give the alarm."

By reading a 21st Century understanding of Parker's 19th Century words, we recognize that public sin is indeed all around us: racism, classism, inequality. Today it is still the place of the church to "give the alarm," name those sins, and bring people together to confront them.

At OUUC, we have called out some of those sins and applied our energy to support Camp Quixote, Quixote Village, and Out of the Woods. We

Rev. Carol McKinley *Affiliated Community Minister coordinated the Washington UU Voices for Justice and now serves on the Pacific NW Board of the UUA.*

are spearheading the Justice Not Jails group to address criminal justice reform.

Our sense of religious community is nurtured in the OUUC Commons; it is a space where we can deepen understanding of our responsibility in the world's commons from our Commons. We take our faith into the public square connecting with others to build a better world.

We are all stewards of the community commons and its physical and spiritual environment. As stewards, we want the resources of the commons to be shared with all, and ensure they are carried into the future. In this way we honor our debt to past generations, and create a link to future generations, a visible testament to the possibility of community and our faith in the future.

The Reverend Jay Leach, minister of the UU Church of Charlotte, Virginia, has written:

"[Unitarian Universalism's] most radical, controversial, countercultural message just may be our affirmation that each of us, every single, individual one of us is a part of an interdependent web of all existence. To make such an affirmation with full integrity suggests that "what's in it for me?" is directly, inextricably, completely entwined in 'what's in it for...us?'

"If the web of existence of which we are each parts truly is interdependent, then there is really only the common good.

"We need one another. We need the good news of this liberal religion. This community, our nation and our world need our radical, controversial, countercultural message that there are questions far, far more important than "what's in it for me?"

The Commons is more than a space; it can represent how each of us can move from our individual lives into the larger world, recognizing our role and responsibility in that interdependent web of life. Let us use the Commons to nourish our sense of the OUUC community we have built, then take our renewed spirits to work for a better world.✦

The Common Good in Our Congregation

BY BRIAN HOVIS

Most OUUC members and friends are members of groups that work for the common good. I went to the Capitol Land Trust breakfast as a guest of table captain, Diana Larsen Mills, a member of OUUC. Throughout the room I spotted OUUCers at many of the other tables. These connections led me to wonder how our involvement in the Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation enables our work for the common good or, let's say, the "community commons"?

Would I have been at the Capital Land Trust breakfast without my OUUC connection? Maybe. I have many connections to social and environmental justice organizations outside of OUUC, and I was certainly active in community before I joined this religious community. But OUUC helps me be consistent with my interest in the common good and actions I can take in the world. I get part of my motivation from the participation in worship and from fellowship with such fine and giving people.

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When we gather together, particularly in worship, I experience the divine/God/creative force (pick or add your term). My term is God. I want to reflect that experience in my life with action. That is one of the strengths of our congregation: the opportunities and encouragement to be better people and work for the common good.

Of course, there are many groups of people who work for the common good and some not associated at all with a formal spiritual practice. In fact, Ken Guza was the other table captain with Diana Larsen-Mills (his wife) and he doesn't regularly attend OUUC. People find their own motivation. These groups could be as diverse as a PTA, a bike club, or a political party. Many of them are formed specifically to foster a specific social good such as a fund-raiser for local conservation efforts.

What makes our congregation, or any religion-based organization, a different kind of volunteer association is its roots in spiritual practice. James Luther Adams, one of my favorite Unitarian theologians (and also from Washington), stressed the importance of voluntary associations in promoting social justice and noted that when such associations are rooted in religion, they have a particular power for good or evil.

Our congregation has as part of its function to foster an awareness of what I might look like as a better person. With that awareness comes the multitude of possible ways (inside and outside OUUC) that we can work towards the common good in our world. OUUC helps me to be a better person, because I am reminded of what is right and just (God in my term) and am encouraged to take action.

This volunteer association with and commitment to OUUC is reflected in the many ways we all work for the common good. The spiritual practice and fellowship helps me to be a better person and take actions for the community commons. In the words of James Luther Adams: "In this sense we may understand the New Testament word, 'By their fruits shall you know them'; but to this work we should add the admonition, by their *groups* shall you know them." ✦

Brian Hovis
Brian's community connections include assisting organizations dedicated to people who are homeless.

A Multigenerational Commons

BY SARA LEWIS

The theme of this edition of the ezine is The Commons which is the same name we chose for our beautiful entry and social hall when we expanded our facilities. This was the same expansion project that gave us our fabulous nursery and classrooms for religious education programs. The very fact that we chose to build those classrooms and made that commitment to creating space for us all shows that this congregation values children, families, young people, and multigenerational community.

And yet…despite what I know is our common commitment…I also hear a frequent complaint: where are all the young people/older people/ people without kids/people with kids/people different from me? Why don't they show up for _____ (insert event important to the speaker)? How can I reach them? Why don't they care about _____ (insert issue important to the speaker)?

Although from my point of view I do see young people in our worship services, families showing up for volunteer commitments, and non-parents teaching the children's classes, of course we could always do better at achieving a truly inclusive and multigenerational community. We are not alone in this, as our society as a whole is becoming more and more age-segregated. Church is one of the last places where people of different ages who are not related to one another co-mingle in community. Even within our families there is less contact as extended families live farther apart and the structure of our society does not support family time or neighborhood casual play like it once did.

When church becomes the only place for our elders to see children, or for young adults to chat with seniors, of course there is a longing to look around and see everyone in the Commons. But just "seeing" diversity (of any kind) is a shallow kind of community. Putting people (of any age or category) on display for the pleasure of others (and sometimes bringing children forward in the worship service can be like this) is not inclusive, but is rather an example of tokenism. We have to move beyond a desire to simply "see" people of all ages in our common space, and move toward a community which fosters true and honest multigenerational interaction and ultimately real relationships.

This is why the Commons is not enough. It's a bit like building a really nice park in the middle of town and hoping that it will create relationships among all the townspeople. Some relationships will be formed, and some polite co-use will happen. But the vast majority of folks won't form lasting and true relationships by waving at each other in the park.

To continue this metaphor, I imagine it might be tempting then to decide to have a party and invite all your neighbors. But what kind of party will it be? Will everyone be comfortable there? What if they don't show up? We do this all the time when we send out invitations and roll out the welcome mat for our own kind of party, and then wonder why people different from ourselves didn't show up for it. A whole town of welcome mats, but where no one ever leaves the comfort of their own home, won't be much of a community either.

Ultimately, this is a road that goes both ways. Young people may not be joining your committee. Older folks aren't on your favorite social media platform. People without children in the Religious Education program don't come out in great numbers to watch the Yule Play, and people with children at home don't come out in great numbers for the congregational meeting.

In our common space we need more hands and feet willing to move across the unseen divides.

To change this, to create a true multigenerational community, requires that more of us start to cross those bridges. We need to walk across the room and engage someone of a different age in real conversation. We need to not only invite them to join us on our team/ committee/project/event but also ask them what they are working on, what is important to them, what do they like to do, and how could you be of help with that?

You might have to go to a party where you don't like the music, for instance. You might have to learn a new way of doing things (like monthly committee meetings, or online platforms). But in the process, you'll be a generational bridge builder. And that's what we need in our common space: more hands and feet willing to move across the unseen divides. And that would be one really awesome/insert-generational-slang-of-your-own party to have in our Commons. ✦

Sara Lewis
Sara has been the Director of Lifespan Religious Education since 2008 where she has found her calling and her passion.

The Commons: A Hospitable Place for Faith Formation

BY THE REV. EMILY MELCHER

When my seminary class on Unitarian Universalist Religious Education met for the first time, the instructor asked us each to define religious education. We were given a few minutes to formulate and write down our definitions, and then we shared them with the class. I took a deep breath, and wrote a definition I still stand by today. "Religious Education is everything we do in our congregations from worship to classes and small group ministry, to engaging in the democratic process of congregational meetings; from caring for our facilities to caring for one another; from sorting books to preparing coffee to participating in the stewardship of our congregation —everything we do, everything we experience in our congregations, shapes both us and our essential orientation to life." In other words,

Everything we do and everything we experience in our congregations, shapes both us and our essential orientation to life.

everything we do in our congregations helps us to grow in faith by which I mean not a fixed set of beliefs, but a sense of meaning and purpose and an understanding of our rightful place in the universe.

For more than a decade now, the words "faith formation" have been in common use in UU circles, sometimes replacing the more traditional "religious education"; other times used to mean something slightly different.

Whether applied to programs for children, youth or adults, the phrase "religious education" tends to conjure up classroom learning, teachers, students, and curricula, directing our attention to what are known as "planned learning opportunities" or "explicit curricula." I prefer the term "faith formation," because it names the outcome of everything we do, since everything we do helps to shape our faith.

The Commons is a place where people meet by happenstance and intention and have a sense of a shared, interdependent life within a manageable frame.

In Big Questions, Worthy Dreams, author Sharon Daloz Parks describes faith thusly:

"[The] capacity and demand for meaning is what I invite the reader to associate with the word faith. For most of us, this represents a shift from the usual connotations. Faith is often linked exclusively to belief, parochially understood. Faith is more adequately recognized as the activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive dimension of our experience. Faith is a broad, generic human phenomenon. To be human is to dwell in faith, to dwell in the sense one makes out of life—what seems ultimately true and dependable about self, world, and cosmos (whether that meaning be strong or fragile, expressed in religious or secular terms). This way of understanding the nature of faith has value for secular and religious folk alike. It addresses our culture's current hunger for a shared language about things "spiritual." pg. 7

Parks' book speaks to adults who are in a position to provide mentoring for young adults and to nurture mentoring communities and environments for young adults' search for meaning, purpose and faith. She identifies three "practices" hospitable to this search: hearth which encourages people to linger and engage in deep reflection; table where you know there will be a place for you, and that you will have expectations placed upon you; and commons.

"The commons," writes Parks, *"is the image that stands behind the concept of the common good. It is a place where people meet by happenstance and intention and have a sense of a shared, interdependent life within a manageable frame. The commons affords practices of interrelatedness, belonging, and learning how to stand—and stand with—each other over time…an active practice of the commons can bring together in fruitful tension and celebration the disparate elements of the community. It is a place within which to confirm a common, connected life, and in combination with various forms of story and ritual it can become the center of shared faith and grounded hope. A practice of the commons sets at the heart's core an imagination of we and weaves a way of life that conveys meaning and orients purpose and commitment."*

Author, educator and activist Parker J. Palmer also recognizes the importance of "setting at the heart's core an imagination of we," and he see the commons as a vital means for doing so. In *Healing the Heart of Democracy,* Palmer writes,

"Citizenship is a way of being in the world rooted in the knowledge that I am a member of a vast community of human and nonhuman beings that I depend on for essentials I could never provide for myself."

Palmer notes that democracy is in peril, not least because so many have retreated from civic life—from the commons between the private and the political which are absolutely vital to democracy.

In America today, many people have very nearly seceded from the union as individuals, abandoning the commons for the private realm, trading citizenship for consumerism, our individual desires often trumping the common good. Those who have the means to do so tend to insulate themselves and their children traveling by cars rather than public transportation; living in segregated cities; attending private schools; and making other choices that divert investment of time, energy and resources from the common good, and ensure that we forgo the tensions—and miss the opportunities—of diversity, in favor of individual desires and comfort.

Where we have largely lost the sense of our interdependence, our religious communities are one type of commons that can help us regain that sense. In the commons of our religious communities, we find purpose and meaning in something that both includes and transcends ourselves, whether it be the gathered community, serving the needs of others beyond the community, or advocating for the common good.

Where we have largely lost the sense of our interdependence, our religious communities are one type of commons that can help us regain that sense.

Palmer writes, "The true intent of all the great world religions is to help people find meaning and purpose amid life's endless tensions—especially the tension involved in trying to live a meaningful life despite the certainty of death, which would seem to obliterate all meaning."

The key to Palmer's statement is "amid life's tensions." He cautions that when we belong only to voluntary associations (such as religious communities) "composed of people with similar life experiences and beliefs," those associations function more like "extensions of private life instead of microcosms of public life."

Drawing on the observations of democracy in America made by 19th Century French political thinker, Alexis de Tocqueville, Palmer writes:

"Tocqueville saw that American democracy would fail if generation after generation of citizens did not develop what he called the "habits of the heart" that democracy requires. By that phrase he meant deeply ingrained patterns of receiving, interpreting, and responding to experiences that involve our intellects, emotions, self-images, and concepts of meaning and purpose—habits that form the inward and invisible infrastructure of democracy."

There may, in fact, be little difference between these "habits of the heart" and the practice of the commons Parks describes, which "sets at the heart's core an imagination of we and weaves a way of life that conveys meaning and orients purpose and commitment."

If we are to develop these "habits of the heart," our commons must be diverse. Rather than providing escape from life's endless tensions, they must provide us with opportunities to engage them, challenging and shaping us by bringing us into dialog with people unlike ourselves, and ways of thinking unlike our own. In this sort of commons, we learn to hold the tension between our individual desires and the common good, which engages us in deep questions of meaning and purpose.

The commons of our religious communities alone are not sufficient to "form the inward and invisible infrastructure of democracy" (this requires the commons of larger, more diverse communities), but certainly they play an important role. The commons of liberal religious communities such as those found in Unitarian Universalist congregations, where the democratic process is held as an essential value, where reason is valued and the rights of the individual are affirmed within a structure that also nurtures interdependence and seeks the common good, nourish the development of "habits of the heart" in those who truly participate.

While Parker Palmer's focus is on the democratic society, and Sharon Daloz Parks writes for adults involved in supporting the faith formation of young adults, both name the commons as a vital place or practice wherein human beings find purpose and meaning in something beyond themselves, and come to awareness of themselves within a system that engages, challenges, shapes, holds, and transcends them.

Just as I see everything we do in our congregations as faith formation, so I see all of congregational life as a commons—a place where we meet diverse others, where we learn to be in community, to hold the tensions inherent in diversity, to seek a good beyond the personal, and to engage life's biggest questions.

That the Olympia Unitarian Universalist congregation has chosen the name "The Commons" for the space that links the sanctuary to the offices and classrooms strikes me as fitting for this Commons functions both as a crossroads where people meet by happenstance on their way to other rooms and as a gathering space where people encounter one another informally on their way to or from an activity, or gather purposefully for coffee hour or to share a meal together. It's one of the places people go to find information about the congregation's commitments and opportunities, to discuss ideas, and to share fellowship, not only on Sunday mornings, but during the week.

Pass-through windows link the kitchen to the Commons, creating a hub of hospitality at center of the

facilities and activities. On one side of the hub is the sanctuary, where people gather for worship and congregational meetings. On the other side are offices and classrooms where religious education classes, committee meetings and the daily work of the church take place. The building is located in a woods, and that woods is visible from nearly every space in the building—a constant reminder of our dependence on the natural world.

In the space named "the Commons," and in the practice of the commons, we grow in faith by engaging "the activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive dimension of our experience."

Now, at the dawning of the twenty-first century, I continue to watch young adults reach for a place of belonging, integrity, and contribution that can anchor meaningful hope in themselves and our shared future.

A powerful image buried deep in the civil imagination of American society is that of the commons. In ancient societies, it was and remains the crossroads at the center of the village. It has also taken the form of the great plazas in Europe and elsewhere. In New England, it was the classic patch of green where everyone could pasture a cow; it was framed by an ecology of institutions—the general store, town meeting hall, school, church, bank, post office, the doctor's house, and a flock of households with the farmlands beyond. People gathered on the commons for play and protest, memorial and celebration, and worked out how they would live together.

The commons is not a pristine romantic image. Whether in the form of Main Street or the wharf; the church, synagogue, or mosque; the bodega or the stoops of the brownstones; the city square or the ball field, the practice of the commons is always a mix of sins and graces. But wherever there is a consciousness of participation in a commons, there is an anchored sense of shared life within a manageable frame.

Today the commons is global in scope and personal in impact. Travel, communications, and entertainment technologies, along with the emergence of a global market and growing awareness of our interdependence within the natural environment, have cast all of us into a new global commons. On this new commons, society has become yet more complex, diverse, and morally ambiguous. As addressed in our book *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World*, there is an enormous need for an understanding and practice of human development that prepares people to become citizen-leaders in this new commons, able to engage the great questions of our time and to participate in discovering and creating responses to challenges both new and ancient.

Democratic societies are dependent upon a complex moral conscience—a citizenry who can recognize and assess the claims of multiple perspectives and are steeped in critical, systemic and compassionate habits of mind. Initiating young adults into viable forms of meaning and faith that can undergird these tasks is a critical feature of our vocation as a species on the edge of a new cultural landscape.

People gathered on the commons for play and protest, memorial and celebration, and worked out how they would live together.

Parker Palmer:

"Heart…is a word that reaches far beyond our feelings. It points toward a larger way of knowing—of receiving and reflecting on our experience—that goes deeper than the mind alone can take us. The heart is where we integrate the intellect with the rest of our faculties, such as emotion, imagination, and intuitions. It is where we can learn how to "think the world together," not apart, and find the courage to act on what we know.

You could say that religious commons is also the crossroads between the private and the political. In our religious communities, we grow as individuals, we form friendships, mentoring relationships, we bring the challenges of our private life to the altar of humanity, but here we are also invited, and challenged, to engage not just at the level of the commons, but at the level of politics for from here, we also influence the course of our state.

Tocqueville saw that American democracy would fail if generation after generation of citizens did not develop what he called the "habits of the heart" that democracy requires. By that phrase he meant deeply ingrained patterns of receiving, interpreting, and responding to experiences that involve our intellects, emotions, self-images, and concepts of meaning and purpose—habits that for the inward and invisible infrastructure of democracy."

Alexis de Tocqueville was especially concerned about the American habit of the heart he called "individualism," which he defines as "a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself:" As social equality spreads and individualism grows, he wrote, "there are more and more people who, though neither rich nor powerful enough to have much hold over others, have gained or kept enough wealth and enough understanding to look after their own needs. Such folk owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody. The form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine their whole destiny is in their hands."

Some people feel secure only by withdrawing from the public realm into a protected private life with people of "their own kind." ✦

Rev. Emily Melcher
joined OUUC as Interim Minister in 2014 and will serve through 2016. She specializes in the transition between settled ministers.

The Commons—Uncommon Space

BY HELEN HENRY

Symbols of different faiths are stitched on banners inside the entrance of the church and one of the first images for visitors.

The Commons on a Wednesday evening

Flowers greet you at the door. You look up and see colorful banners with beautiful appliqués representing different faiths: the sickle of Muslim, the lotus of Hindu, the cross of Christianity, the star of Judaism, the chalice of Unitarianism. This is a gathering place of people of all beliefs. This place accepts one another and encourages spiritual growth.

The room has a simple elegance; the classic gabled roof, exposed laminate beams, a polished concrete floor. The hall is wide, warmly lit by the translucent skylights above. The floor reflects light from the windows.

Ahh... the windows. They are large. They invite you deeper into the room and then ask you to look out. Extend yourself beyond the painted walls. They frame the greenery of cedar, fir and fern. Everywhere you look you see the natural world of the northwest. On a quiet spring evening you hear a frog's song. You feel the web of all existence of which we are a part.

Helen Henry
Active on the Worship Arts Committee, Helen finds many ways to act out her commitment to the UU principles.

Standing alone in the middle of this empty room your eyes wander to the Welcome kiosk, the rack of brochures explaining "Who We Are", "The Flaming Chalice", "Addiction Ministry". There are copies of the UU World publication. These resources encourage a responsible search for truth and meaning.

Looking around the room you see the notices; Community Kitchen sign up, Shelter sign up, Warm Window Project. A brochure from the Senior Center describes Meals on Wheels. The core of all these activities is the belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

A small yellow sign declares, "We serve Fair Trade coffee." These coffee drinkers believe in justice, equity and compassion in human relations and work.

There are lists for Dinners for Eight and neighborhood maps for carpooling. Announcements for parents' night out, young adult potluck, Book Sale and Auction. You know this empty room is waiting. Waiting to be full of life...full of people doing good things. Having fun together. Working hard together. Sharing in a beloved community.

This room is waiting. Waiting to be transformed into a Thursday night Family Potluck followed by board games for all. Transformed into a jazz bistro raising funds for the homeless family shelter. Transformed into an auction dinner to generate dollars to sustain the church and all it does.

The Commons on a Sunday morning

The room is no longer empty, no longer waiting. It is overflowing with life. Overflowing with that busy, beloved community. You touch shoulders as you make your way to coffee. Finding friends, noticing newcomers. Sending messages to those you know, encouraging those who are new to you. "We're happy you've joined us." "Please come back. Each week can be different."

You talk to a board member about an issue regarding church policy. You discuss a recent change in worship. You are reminded of the upcoming congregational meeting. This congregation believes in the use of the democratic process with our congregations and society at large.

You overhear members discussing the music, readings and reflection they've just experienced in worship. The words of the minister have led to shared thoughts of a world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.

This room may be simple in design but it is not a simple place. It is a place that holds humans in community, working for the common good. A place where extraordinary principles come together in ordinary ways. ✦

Under the Banners—My Story

BY JAN SPILLER

Banners as they hang near the entrance and as a welcome to "The Commons" as well as to OUUC.

They caught my eye the first time I entered OUUC's doors. Hanging above me were eight colorful banners, each emblazoned with a world religion's symbol. At the time, the only one I could not identify was the UU's flaming chalice.

I came to this unfamiliar place for an Adult Education class on humanity's role in the earth's flourishing. I knew nothing about Unitarian Universalism. Nor was I looking for a church I might join. A self-declared spiritual seeker and tagged as such by anyone viewing my bookshelves, I had left behind the Catholicism in which I was raised in my early 30s.

My spiritual journey took on a whole new task separate from what I was taught about what I must and should believe, sifting to find what, in truth, I did believe. Definitely, not an overnight process.

Seeking truth, purpose and a more authentic self, I reached outward, but mostly within. I explored other spiritual paths, practices and service. Along the way, I fell into rabbit holes which offered their own lessons. Coursework offered insights; meditation offered centering. Most meaningful in pointing the way and experiencing what I will call here 'Is-ness'. For a while, I pursued a more contemplative life and sought meaning in volunteer service.

The day I first entered the Commons, I was an unaffiliated individual member of Interfaith Works wanting to work locally toward what might bind and unite the area's faith communities. OUUC's banners piqued my curiosity...What do these banners mean to members of this church? What do the members actually believe? What brings them together to worship?

When the Adult Education class ended a few weeks later, I returned to check out a Sunday service. Then another and another. After months of interacting with members—questioning, observing, listening—and some volunteering in various non-committal ways, I found I had come upon a walk-the-talk community of people who agreed not on dogma but on a set of principles and values they want to live by. They appeared willing and committed to put them into practice in dealing with each other and in the community at large. Their participation together in the start-up and support of two homeless shelters, Out of the Woods and Camp Quixote surely spoke of that. Impressive!

Still, I had to face resistance to joining. And to community itself—the word alone carried some dispiriting history. Charles Schultz's "I love humanity! It's people I can't stand." even came to mind in the shuffle. And commitment? Ah, more shuffling.

What I came to in short: A solo flight indeed offers freedom and independence. At some point, however, the pilot must acknowledge dependency and land. So as consciously and responsibly as able, I did so and joined the congregation. (One step towards authenticity.)

Questions initially posed by the banners continue to engage me. Journeying while in the Commons, I find the banners also serve an icon role. They may remind me to practice welcoming diversity. Or to practice seeking common ground in what seems opposition. Some days. these works of art serve as reminders of Love's presence even in times of wars called holy. Other times, they seem to hang solely for the sake of justice.

I find the banner messages change, and are many. "Practice peace", they may counsel. Sometimes they just whisper: "Practice loving you". ✦

Jan Spiller
Involved in OUUC for 10 years, Jan has engaged in questioning, participating and developing her faith's journey.

The Common Good in Olympia

BY EMILY RAY

"Try the Dollar Store!" "The bulk bins at Haggen's have some great ideas!" "For the rooftops, Necco Wafers make perfect tiles!" The hunt was on for cheap, colorful candies.

No, not to eat—to adorn gingerbread creations in a fund-raising scheme for Sidewalk. Teams from OUUC competed good naturedly with other organizations around town. The Washington Center for the Performing Arts provided a viewing space, and the public was invited to stop by.

Ultimately, the creations were sold through a silent auction. The result was $8,000 raised to help end homelessness in our community.

The idea for the gingerbread fundraiser for Sidewalk came from long-time OUUC members Kelly and Mary Ann Thompson. They involved members of the Olympia Yacht Club, and other organizations and individuals jumped into the powdered sugar fray. The goal was a serious one, of grave community importance, but the project was just plain old fashioned fun, and a way to build relationships with new friends and acquaintances.

OUUC members have long had formal and informal links throughout the community. More than 60 years ago, some helped launch mental health services, Head Start, and the Family Support Center in Thurston County. Today, chat with your friends at OUUC and you'll find all kinds of quiet activism going on. Samantha Ritchie serves as the medical director of the Olympia Free Clinic, and Fritz Wrede serves on the board. And Melissa Denton is their lawyer.

Nancy Curtiss is the local sparkplug of Results, a multi-pronged campaign to improve our world. A number of other OUUC folks have jumped onto that bandwagon.

Peace in the Middle East is the primary concern of Sally Brownfield and her husband Mohammed Bentlemsani who are active in the Rachel Corrie Foundation. Douglas Mackey and Jodi Tiller express that concern through, among other activities, Global Days of Listening. This means they are up at 4:30 a.m. the 21st day of each month to participate in a broadcast telephone conversation around the world with people from Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other countries.

Closer to home, a lot of OUUC members are involved with helping low-income and homeless people. JoAnne Young and Billie Williams have co-facilitated our congregation's involvement in the Interfaith Works shelter program. Karmel Shields is the crew leader for OUUC members and friends who, one Friday a month, put on their aprons and prepare the meal served in the Salvation Army building. (Some 60 organizations in all cook and serve there under the auspices of Catholic Community Services.) Debby Pattin is involved with the Fishanthropists, a group of women who met years ago at the Fishbowl Pub and raise funds for non profits. The biggest annual fundraiser is The Brash Bash, a Christmas concert that raises hundreds of dollars and collects thousands of cans of food for the Thurston Country Food Bank. Some of their many other projects include the Thurston—Mason Literacy Project and Pints Against Prostate Cancer.

Our congregation as a whole supports Out of the Woods, a separate organization long associated with us. Connie Ruhl is who one gives it special attention. A teacher of yoga and co-facilitator of Mindfulness Meditation, she dedicates all the fees and donations she receives to the shelter for homeless families.

Diana Larsen-Mills is one of the movers and shakers behind the South Sound Estuary Association, to create opportunities for the public to learn about our rich natural environment and the human impacts on Puget Sound. Safety on Puget Sound has been the interest of Linda Whitcher who serves as a crew member aboard the Harbor Patrol (whose future funding is currently in doubt).

Changing our society's values and governance is where other members put their voices and talents. Mary Moore lobbies on behalf of the state League of Women Voters on the issues of climate change and energy during legislative sessions. Susan Bakke has been deeply involved in state and national efforts to stop gun violence.

Sometimes an Adult Education class has morphed into something bigger. Last year, Steve Tilley coordinated a multi-week class on local criminal justice issues. Now that group grown beyond our walls and has become a de-facto interfaith organization. All work together to reform the criminal justice and immigration systems.

These brief personal vignettes are just the tip of the iceberg. Scores of OUUC members and friends work in the groups mentioned and many others to better our community and our world. We demonstrate our care every Sunday when we dedicate half of the collection plate to local organizations that support our values. Since 2004, we have raised over $135,704 to support some 50 local organizations. If you are looking for meaningful ways to engage with the wider community, volunteering can be a satisfying—and sweet—way to serve. ✦

Emily Ray
Emily, a member since 1968, draws upon a wealth of experience, connections and historical memory.

What We Have in Common

BY GAIL GOSNEY WREDE

I have been a Unitarian Universalist for over 30 years now yet only recently have truly begun to understand the meaning and the power of our seven UU principles.

It is one thing to say that we respect, value and honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person (our first principle). It is another to truly live that value by welcoming diverse people into our community and treating all people with dignity—people with disabilities, people without homes, people with addictions and people of all ages—in a manner that shows compassion in human relations and true acceptance of one another.

In the past few years, there has been a tremendous growth in how the OUUC community has embraced the first principle. We have hosted the overnight shelter for homeless adults for several years now with OUUC members staying up at night to welcome our guests, prepare food, be in community and share our stories. We have opened a shelter for homeless families, Out of the Woods, and continue to support its mission and financial health through annual giving and sponsorship of an annual fundraiser, Books, Brownies and Beans.

The value of the community work has...increased our understanding of what we as humans have in common.

OUUC members have also been key leaders in the community in developing and maintaining first, Camp Quixote, and then Quixote Village for people who are transitioning from homelessness to community living.

We are a community that truly believes in social justice. I have also seen how this mission has transformed lives—the lives of the people we have helped shelter and the lives of OUUC members who have grown in understanding and compassion for people who have ended up without homes. Some of us have led privileged and/or sheltered lives; our work toward ending homelessness has helped each of us grow in our understanding of our common humanity with all of its joys and sorrows.

It is easy to write or say these actions and accomplishments that promote the common good and honor each person's worth and dignity. Yet, it is another to truly understand what these actions have meant in developing a sense of common purpose among OUUC members and in advancing individual understanding of the value of each person's life experiences and talents.

For me, the true value of the work that OUUC has done in our community to promote human dignity is that each member has pushed her or his understanding of human nature, opened their hearts and minds to the variety of human experience and increased their understanding of what we as humans have in common. ✦

Gail Gosney Wrede
is a 30-year member who has served in leadership, in support roles, and in community service throughout.

Staff and the Common Good

BY DARLENE SARKELA

Church staff are the people you usually see every Sunday morning to make sure the worship services and other programs run as smoothly as possible.

Some of the effort is out front; some is behind the scenes. But it's not only on Sundays that the work is done. And it's not only done within the confines of OUUC. Church staff work for the common good in the larger Unitarian Universalist community helping to grow Unitarian Universalism through a number of connections.

Director of Lifespan Religious Education, Sara Lewis, is a member of LREDA (Liberal Religious Educator's Association). She participates on the LREDA listserve and meets monthly with the LREDA Puget Sound cluster sharing information and offering support to other Religious Education professionals. Her years of experience have brought her to leadership positions in her field.

Sara is Vice President of the Board of the Pacific Northwest Chapter. She has become a mentor for new Directors of Religious Education. She is on the Continental Conference Planning Committee (includes US and Canadian congregations). Sara is also a process observer in the Director of Lifespan Religious Education credentialing process for the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Troy Fisher, OUUC's Music Director, is a member of the Unitarian Universalist Musician's Network. He networks with other UU Music Directors on concerts featuring UU choirs from throughout the Pacific Northwest. He has directed the choir at the Pacific Northwest District Annual Meeting.

Troy leads the OUUC choir in events outside the walls of OUUC, even taking them as far as our partner church in Kissolymos, Romania. The choir has performed in the Capitol Rotunda and at the Interfaith Works Thanksgiving Service. The choir (as well as the Saturday Voice Class) has provided music at retirement homes in the area on many occasions.

Congregational Administrator, Darlene Sarkela has over twenty years of experience in church administration working at OUUC when it was a small pastoral church and growing with the job as OUUC became a mid-sized congregation. She has been a member of the Association of Unitarian Universalist Administrators for many years, participating on the listserve, offering the knowledge she has collected over the years (from building management to tax law to software how-tos).

Unitarian Universalist Administrators often serve in churches in areas where there is little opportunity for networking, so the virtual community is very important. Darlene recently pulled together a meeting of Puget Sound Administrators. Ten Administrators had the opportunity to meet in person in Olympia. More meetings are being planned. Darlene belongs to a number of Unitarian Universalist groups online to discuss church growth, communication, social media and class awareness. She also participates in activities of the National Association of Church Business Administrators (church office workers from Christian faith traditions).

OUUC's Connections Coordinator, Bonnie Guyer Graham, is a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Membership Professionals. The group meets online and has monthly book discussions. Bonnie has sought out the four other Membership Professionals in Washington and has visited other churches to meet those who do similar work.

Bonnie recently participated in an interim training opportunity through the Unitarian Universalist Association. Bonnie networks in the Olympia community by attending monthly South Sound Volunteer Coordinators meetings supported by the United Way and attends meetings and trainings held by Volunteer Administrator's Network based in Seattle.

Common occurrences at OUUC are phone calls or emails to staff from church leaders (UU and others) throughout the area. The basic questions are "how do you _____?" or "what is your policy on _____?" Your church staff are able to answer these questions because of the good work of the entire community in building a church that is actively fulfilling its mission.

So, remember as we work for the common good in our home congregation, we are growing Unitarian Universalism beyond our doors. Keep doing the good work and know that your staff will be sharing the good news! ✦

Interim Minister
The Rev. Emily Melcher

Director of Lifespan Religious Education
Sara Lewis

Music Director
Troy Fisher

Connections Coordinator
Bonnie Guyer Graham

Administrator
Darlene Sarkela

Darlene Sarkela
Responding to a newspaper ad, Darlene has been the church administrator since 1991.

Warm Windows Project

BY JOE JOY

The Warm Windows Project, ongoing for five years now, offers the homeowner, renter, or landlord windows which are an economical alternative to commercial storm windows. Workshops are conducted to assist participants in building their own windows for a nominal fee. Workshops are open to the public and generally run two Saturdays per month from October through February.

Why are UUs doing this sort of thing? The project is an example of putting the 7th UU Principle, respect for the interdependent web of all existence, into practice. The project reduces community energy use, addresses environmental justice, involves the community, interacts with environmental organizations, interacts with housing/special needs groups, meets the community at large, develops Congregation skills, develops project management experience, and develops volunteers. How better to serve the common good!

The windows are based on a popular design used in Maine and the northeast and are custom-built to dimensions supplied by the workshop participant. The window film is clear and UV-resistant. The windows prevent condensation, air infiltration, and heat loss. They are affordable and effective. ✦

Joe Joy
Quietly but doggedly, Joe has pursued his commitment to environmental justice in many ways over his 25 years at OUUC.

Oasis in the Commons

BY DEB ROSS

When you enter the Commons before service, you will see people wearing an array of stoles. Each stole identifies a person's role for that day—greeter, usher, choir member, pastor. One stole that I have the privilege of wearing once a month is in a beautiful green print with a chalice and the words Pastoral Care Team embroidered on it. I sometimes think of it as a super-power cape, because it helps me to become a better person when I wear it.

A member of the Pastoral Care Team can always be found before and between services at our station just to the left of the sanctuary door. Here you will also find a pedestal with the "Joys and Sorrows book" for the sharing of personal joys and sorrows. When we put on the Pastoral Care Team stole, we try to listen more carefully to, and interact more intentionally with, everyone who stops by the station. We try to set aside a few minutes to talk to each person without being distracted by the hustle, bustle, and "business" of the Commons on a Sunday morning. In that way, the Pastoral Care Team station can be an oasis of ministry to the spirit.

Here's a secret: everyone in this congregation has that super power of being able to listen deeply and intentionally and to show someone you care. On a Sunday morning in the Commons, take a few minutes away from buying that event ticket, signing up for that volunteer activity, scheduling that committee meeting, supporting that cause. Look around for someone who may be looking a little lost or alone, and ask them how they are doing. Acknowledge someone who has shared a joy or sorrow during the service. Listen deeply. Don't try to fix whatever is wrong. You may think your cape is invisible, but it is shining brightly when you show someone you care. ✦

Deb Ross
Author, local historian, and church member, Deb adds passion and depth to her involvements.

The Commons