



Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation
Sunday, October 22, 2023

“Yours, Mine and Ours” - Rev. Mary Gear

Opening Words:

Our opening words are adapted by those offered by Rev. Nathan C. Walker.

When you come to me,

come not with the expectation to have some passive clergy person coddle you into complacency.

No. Come to me as your PST— your personal spiritual trainer.

I’m serious. I want to see you move.

I want to see you root yourself in a community

Built on moral complexity and to hold one another to the ethic of intellectual honesty.

I want to see you exercise spiritual practices to the point of training your mind and body and spirit to collaborate as a single, integrated, and dynamic entity.

I want to hear you articulate your beliefs.

I want to know that you are engaged in the moral issues of our time.

I want to know what makes you afraid.

I want to know if you are cultivating your doubts and your questions so that when you do take a stand, we can all trust your authenticity.

I want to know the intricacies of how you are treating other people.

I want to know if you have learned to like yourself.

Have you learned to love yourself?

I want to know if you feel alive.

I want to know if you feel like you belong, like you feel like you matter, because to me, you do.

You do. Because you are my personal spiritual trainers.

Story for All:

On June 4, 2022 OUUC celebrated its 70th anniversary and we installed Rev. Mary as our settled minister. It was a joyous celebration! Thanks to Des McGahern, Lee Doyle, Riley McLaughlin, Tim Ransom, Emily Ray, Martha Guilfoyle, Dio Lewis, John Tafejian, and the many people who helped us create this celebration of OUUC's 70 years.

[Happy 70th Anniversary OUUC!](#)

Reading I

Today's first reading is an excerpt adapted from "Size Transitions in Unitarian Universalist Congregations" published by the Unitarian Universalist Association in 2005.

If all congregations kept the same members, stayed the same size, retained the same minister and staff members, and always had the same well-known set of issues, religious life would be easy. It would also be fabulously boring. It is exciting to welcome new guests, hear new sermons, and puzzle over new challenges, but it is not easy.

Getting used to change is the hardest change of all.

Somehow, we imagine that it is possible to live without change. [Yet] To live is to grow; to grow is to change.

Therefore, to live is to change, and any thought that we can avoid change in life is pure illusion.

...We Unitarian Universalists must recognize our need to overcome our resistance to changes in congregational life, and any attitudes we hold that neglect those who seek our saving faith.

Part I: The Theory

I invite you to recall the year that you first came to OUUC. For some of you, that was 40 or more years ago. For some of you, today is your first visit. For some of you, you were here and then stepped away for a while and are now back, so you may have 2 different years to recall. Just bring to mind the year or years that you came to OUUC.

I'm going to ask you to raise your hand based on the year you came. People online, you, too. If you are willing, unmute your camera. You can see each other if you put your screen on gallery view, and we can see you on the sanctuary screen.

With your year of arrival in mind, raise your hand if you came to OUUC before 1993. You were in the little white church in Tumwater. You experienced lay-led services and the first ministers; most things were done by congregants. You can put your hands down.

Raise your hand if you came to OUUC between 1993 and 2001. You came to the new building, during a time of debate and dissention, and ministerial transition. You can put your hands down.

Raise your hand if you came to OUUC between 2001 and 2014. You came during a focus on services to those without homes. You experienced the addition to the building, and lots of numerical growth. You can put your hands down.

Raise your hand if you came to OUUC between 2014 and 2019. You came during a time of several ministers and much transition, including big changes to how we do things. You can put your hands down.

Raise your hand if you've come to OUUC since 2019. You came in the time of Covid and a settled ministry that hasn't been very settled. You can put your hands down.

You can see that there are people here who came to OUUC over many decades. As you saw in the 70th anniversary video, the congregation has changed a lot over the years.

It's said among ministers that people tend to think that the congregation is the same as it was when they arrived. Even though we know things have changed, we still think the congregation is just like it was when we got here. I think this is kind of like that experience we have as we age when we look at ourselves in the mirror and wonder who that person is with the laugh lines and silvering hair, when we still imagine in our head that we're 25 years old.

There are theories about how congregations grow and change, and today I'd like to share a model for church size transitions. The wisdom gathered by those who study congregations is that there are 4 sizes of congregations based on Sunday service attendance. Notice that's the number of people who attend, not the number of people who are members.

Family size congregations have attendance up to 50 people.

It's like a family-everyone knows each other, and they are often lay-led. The UFO in the little church in Tumwater was family sized.

Slide: Family size: attendance up to 50

“We all know each other.”

A single cell organism

Known for one major ministry to the community

Leadership is lay leaders, often founders

If present, clergy is part-time and short-term, serves as chaplain

Pastoral size is 51 to 150 attending.

Not too big, but big enough to have a minister. Kind of like a gang with a hub in the center that is the minister.

This transition began with UFO and continued with OUUC. The congregation was pastoral from about 1983 until early 2000's.

Slide: Pastoral size: 51 to 150

Big enough to be “real” church, small enough to feel personal

A few overlapping multi-cell organisms

All centered around the pastor who has relationships with everyone

Move to full time clergy when over 100

Known for 2-3 ministries

Program size: 151 to 350

Rather than being like a family, it's kind of like a neighborhood. Many entry points and ministry is shared. Large enough to have a minister and staff; may need 2 ministers but often can't afford it.

OUUC began transition to program size certainly by 2004 and has been in this transition since. Program size is where we are now.

Slide: Program size: 151 to 350

Known for quality & variety of programs

Larger & diverse membership

Creative ministry; mission focus

Many diverse entry points

Full time clergy and other staff

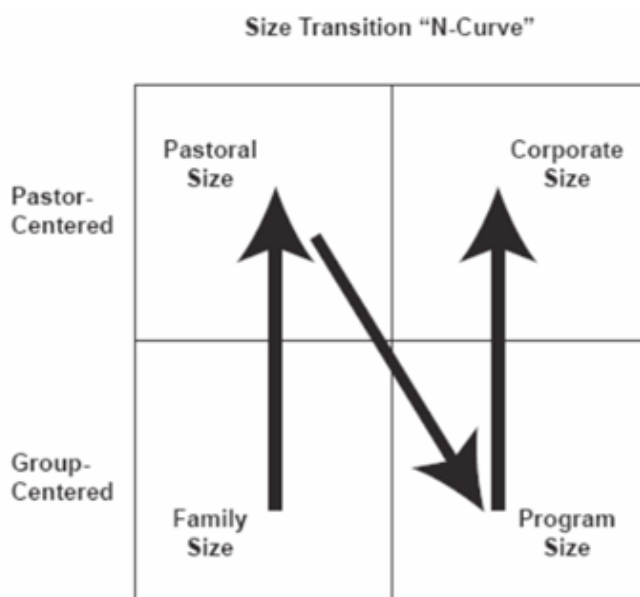
Shared ministry with laity, clergy, staff

The 4th congregational size is corporate, which is more than 350 people attending Sunday services. Whether this congregation wants to be that big is an open question-some people want to grow the church, and some don't. There are advantages and disadvantages to growth, and it is not inevitable. Whether this congregation wants to grow and why is a discussion for another day.

This is a graphic representation of how congregations change and grow. The table has 2 dimensions:

What is at the center--the group/congregation, or the minister/pastor?

Is the congregation single celled/an organism or multi-celled/an organization?



Family to pastoral transition means going from congregation centered to pastor centered. OUUC made that shift back in the 1980's.

The pastoral to program transition is hardest because it requires change in both dimensions-centering from pastor to back to congregation, and single cell to something more complex.

It can take a long time to make the transition from pastoral to program size because the transition is not numbers, the transition is cultural, organizational, and spiritual. It requires intention by leadership-professional and lay leaders.

Some congregations never seem to grow past pastoral size because their organizational structure and culture doesn't welcome growth. Even if their numbers increase, they can't sustain the growth. And some congregations intentionally decide to stay at pastoral size and create a satellite congregation to meet the growing need.

OUUC has been dancing with the pastoral to program transition for almost 20 years. We are too large to be a pastoral sized church and haven't made the organizational and cultural shift to being a program sized church. We've been at an awkward stage, kind of like adolescence, for quite some time.

Here's some statements that express what the cultural and spiritual shift is like for the congregation:

Pastoral	Program
I should be in on most decisions.	I must trust others to make the right decisions.
Let's dissect everything at the annual meeting.	Let's not micromanage.
Why isn't the current staff sufficient?	We can't do it without more staff.
We must justify the spending for me to pledge.	I will give toward the vision.
Am I being served?	Is the world being served?

The cultural shift is from the individual to the collective, from individual needs to a collective vision, from everyone involved in everything, to many activities so there are multiple entry points.

The challenge of a program sized church is to have a sense of connection that doesn't necessarily go through the minister, even when you don't know everyone and can't attend everything. Often that connection happens in worship, which is why meaningful, excellent worship is so important in a program size church. The best description that I've heard is that the pastoral to program transition is from "we are one" to "we are whole."

Congregational size transitions affect not only the people who attend, but also the role of the minister.

Here's what that's like:

Pastoral Congregation Minister	Program Congregation Minister
Community oriented	Organizationally oriented
Empathetic, compassionate	Institutionally wise
Listens, relates, counsels, teaches, administers	Facilitates, trains, organizes, inspires, excellent worship
Rewarded by helping people	Rewarded by partnerships & social transformation; builds capacity
Role is to comfort	Role is to challenge
Burns out trying to meet the pastoral and friendship needs of everyone	Burns out trying to minister to everyone rather than focusing on lay leadership and staff development

The minister's focus also shifts from individuals to the collective, the whole. Not that the minister in a program sized church isn't compassionate and empathetic and doesn't listen or counsel or teach. It's just that the minister in a program sized church counts on lay leaders to help with those functions because they can't do it all, their focus is to build capacity in the organization. A good example of this is the Pastoral Care Team here at OUUC. They help keep tabs on people who are experiencing health problems and other transitions and let me know when something has happened that needs my attention. That is shared ministry.

Reading II

Our second reading is an excerpt from *Serving with Grace: Lay Leadership as a Spiritual Practice* by Rev. Erik Walker Wikstrom

Our congregations are voluntary associations and depend on donations—not just of our financial resources but of our time and talents as well. In fact, even if our members pledge sufficient support that every single task could be farmed out to paid employees, the church would still need volunteers because that's the nature of a volunteer association.

As Rev. Gary Kowalski put it in a sermon,

“People who come to Unitarian Universalism seeking spiritual goods are likely to be disappointed as long as they have the outlook of consumers in search of material goods. If their connection to our liberal faith is to grow into something more rewarding, they have to give up the consumer mindset and begin to think of themselves instead as shareholders, investors, co-owners in what happens in the church.”

Service within the context of your church means working with a group of people who understand your Unitarian Universalist values and commitments and will hold you accountable to them.

Part II: The Practice

When I arrived here in 2019, I found a congregation that was weary of change with exhausted lay leaders. I heard stories of conflict and uncertainty, of pain and a longing for stability. When I arrived, I heard, “We’re so glad you are here! We’ve been waiting for you!” It was a warm welcome! And then you handed me, well, what felt like almost everything. Here’s the stewardship drive and fundraising, here’s our size transition, here’s some long-standing conflicts, here’s our governance change, here’s our need for volunteers, here’s an organizational structure that is understaffed and here’s a staff vacancy. We’re tired, can you take it from here?

That hooked me (again) because I like to be needed and I like to help. I have been trained since childhood to be very responsible and very capable. I really wanted to meet your expectations, so I tried hard to do it all; I took what you handed me. I felt and still feel a pull to be both a pastoral and a program minister as we dance around a size transition, not solidly in either one.

Then shortly after I arrived, Covid hit and that required that we all learn and do more and different things, including me. Technology is a wonderful tool that allows connection and growth

in ways we haven't known, and it's an additional ministry that didn't exist here before. The pastoral to program size transition combined with the after-effects of Covid means that the skills and focus of the congregation and your minister are in flux and can be kind of confusing.

In his book, *Metamorphosis*, Frank Dupree tells the story of a boy who saw a butterfly struggling to emerge from a chrysalis, but the butterfly's body was too big to fit through the opening in the cocoon. The boy wanted to help the butterfly—it was so hard to watch it struggle, and the boy was afraid it would not be able to emerge. So, the boy decided to help the butterfly by using a knife to enlarge the opening in the chrysalis so the butterfly could come out. The butterfly did emerge but could not fly—its wings weren't strong enough. For butterflies to have wings strong enough to fly, they need the struggle of emergence to strengthen their wings.

This is one of those times when it's clear to see intent vs impact: the boy intended to help, and the impact was to hinder.

Trying to do everything to please everyone is called over-functioning. One of the dynamics of over functioning is that we get a lot done. Another dynamic is that when one part of a system over functions, another part under functions.

Those of you who have been around for a while will recognize this dynamic because it exists in this congregation. There's a small group of people who do most things, who over function, and a larger group who don't have to do as much. This is a common dynamic in congregations and in ministers, and it's not a surprise that this over functioning congregation called an over functioning minister. One of the things that connected us is that we excel at getting things done—we share that value. We also share the shadow side of over functioning--sometimes our doing takes away from the opportunity for growth in ourselves and in others. Deep down we know that over functioning isn't sustainable and, in the end, it really doesn't serve anyone.

So today I want to apologize. I'm sorry that I thought I could help you by trying to do it all. I lost my sense of humility and of my humanity, and I forgot a lesson that I have learned before—sometimes helping isn't helpful. I'm sorry and I will do better. That is my spiritual work—you cannot do that for me. You provide the opportunity for me to learn the lessons of living. You are my personal spiritual trainers.

Emerging from Covid, we are beginning again to discover and define who we are as a community and who we want to be in the future. This is a time of great possibility. As we go forward, we need to define what is the work of the congregation and what is the work of the minister. It cannot all belong to the minister and the staff—that's not how congregations work; it's never been the case no matter what the governance model is. The ministry of a congregation is not the minister or the staff or the building, and not even the congregation. The ministry of a congregation is the work that we create and do together. It is shared ministry.

What you can do is your part, your spiritual work---as individuals and as a congregation. As individuals, it's building and maintaining relationships, even when it's hard and there is

conflict—we call that being in covenantal relationship. It's clarifying your values and living those values in the world—we call that putting our faith into action. And it's letting go of what has been, celebrating what we have loved and dreaming of what is possible—we call that mourning and visioning. It means showing up for worship and congregational meetings, for celebrations of life and small groups for spiritual exploration, for rallies and protests. It means sharing your gifts in service to our vision of a ministry to the world that so badly needs it.

As a congregation, your spiritual work is to define who this community is and how you want to be in the world. The congregation decides the justice ministry, how we share power and authority, and how we support and maintain the structures we build, the organization as well as the building. The congregation decides, either consciously or not, whether or not to grow. There have been opportunities for these discussions—the Board held one last Sunday—and more to come in small groups and as a congregation.

As your minister, I can offer invitations to spiritual growth, bearing witness to this congregation's struggle to emerge. I can accompany you on the journey. I can help create sacred space for growth and transformation. I cannot make the struggle go away and I cannot do it for you. Your spiritual growth is yours—as individuals and as a community.

I promise to continue my spiritual growth—even when it is hard to see you struggle—because I am committed not only to my spiritual growth, I am also committed to yours. I made that commitment to you when I accepted your call in 2019 and again when you installed me in 2022. Just like you, I make that commitment every time I show up, and I hold that commitment even when I am not here.

In 1841, Unitarian minister Theodore Parker delivered a sermon titled, “A Discourse on the Transient and the Permanent in Christianity.” This was one of two sermons given in that era by transcendentalists who challenged and changed the theology of our Unitarian tradition. In his sermon, Parker said that the things that many saw as permanent, such as the words and traditions of Christianity, are transient, they change as times change. Words, even the words of the Bible, hymns, rituals, how we do worship—all these things change over time. What is permanent is the essence of the teachings of Jesus and humanity's search for truth, meaning and connection. While this may not sound radical now, those beliefs are just part of our tradition, it was a break with the thinking of time, and Parker was shunned by orthodox Unitarians (yes, there is such a thing!) for his beliefs as he grew and changed.

Parker's question is always a relevant one: in our religious tradition, what is transient and what is permanent? So many things change: the people, the congregation, the minister, the governance model, the ministries, the worship, even the building. What is permanent? I agree with Parker that it is a human desire to seek truth, meaning and connection. Creating a religious community—congregations—is one way we do that. We come together to accompany and support each other in our search. And when we do, no matter how the congregation and ministers and building changes, what remains is shared ministry, shared among the people, all

of the people. It takes all of us to be a thriving congregation and to bring our life-saving faith to the world.

Last Sunday, our speaker Rev. Monica Jacobson-Tennessen said that congregations can be described in many ways: as a refuge from the storms of the world, as a base camp to get refueled, as a team working toward a shared goal. The metaphor that works for me is to describe a congregation as a choir. A choir has many voices with a variety of tones and ranges. Some choirs are large and some small. Sometimes there is a director and sometimes not. There might be section leaders. Sometimes the choir members sing the same note and sometimes they harmonize, and sometimes there's dissonance and the notes clash. Sometimes some voices rest and are quiet. None of the voices can be too loud or overpower the others. The choir members change. The directors change. The songs change. What endures is the desire to sing together, to make music, to create beauty.

And so, this is the invitation that we offer every Sunday when we gather, the invitation we offer each other: Let's sing together, shall we?