

“Building a Welcoming Home”
September 20, 2015 • First Sermon of the Church Year
The Unitarian Church in Charleston
Rev. Danny R. Reed

“Yes, I am here. And you are lucky to be here too
after all the absurd things you’ve done since you left home.”
—J.R.R. Tolkien

In our first service of the program year, we turn to our mission statement to guide us into another season of church life. Our gathering for celebration, fellowship, service, and worship might be more than we may first think. What’s going on here?

An organization’s mission statement describes the reason it exists. It is used by those involved, stakeholders, to guide decisions, resolve conflicts, set priorities. Effective mission statements announce to an outside audience, and remind insiders, “What you do.”

Good examples of mission statements from popular businesses:

- “We work to help people and businesses throughout the world realize their full potential.”—Microsoft.
- “To bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world.”—Nike. (Not “Just do it.” That’s a memorable tag, but it’s advertising, not mission.)¹

Especially effective, and especially brief mission statements from well-known non-profit organizations:

- “Spreading Ideas”—TED (2 words)
- “Celebrating Animals, Confronting Cruelty”
—The Humane Society (4 words)
- “The increase and diffusion of knowledge”
—Smithsonian (6 words)
- “Lifts the spirits of America’s troops and their families”
—USO (9 words)²

¹ “10 Famous Company Mission Statements,” posted by Nathan Sloan in Business 101, Marketing 101, internetmarketingtofreedom.com

² “50 Mission Statements from Top Nonprofits,” topnonprofits.com

Congregations have mission statements too. Perhaps “what a church does” is self-evident: gather for worship, for edification, fellowship, and mutual support; welcome the stranger, reach out to those in need, and celebrate the various stages and transitions of life. Do these accomplishments denote success? I am ambivalent about the notion of a successful church. In an evangelical setting, success could be determined by a high number of souls supposedly saved. But in the progressive Protestant environment, and certainly within free and more liberal congregations, success can be difficult to gauge. Adherence to such a congregation’s mission statement could be an indicator of “a successful church”—a sense of fulfilling, or at least approaching, its stated mission.

In 2003, members of this congregation came together to craft the following mission statement:

“The Unitarian Church in Charleston dedicates itself to principled actions that honor the generations that have brought us here, responsibly nurture our resources, one another and our greater community; and make possible the spiritual journeys of our church family and the generations to come. Our diversity enhances us, our love strengthens us and our convictions empower us.”

I wasn’t around to be part of all that led to it, but it’s an ambitious mission statement, if a bit long, and one I assume served the congregation well. Eight years later, there was consensus among church leaders that a new mission statement should be drafted. The 2003 statement withstood the test of time, but popular thought and practices advise revisiting a mission statement now and again, to be shaken up and rephrased, to keep the stated mission vibrant and vital.

Thus it was that the assembled faithful, in 2011, in a process titled, “Mission So Possible,” maintained the spirit of the 2003 statement, but did so with remarkably fewer words. The 2011 and our current mission statement is:

“Building a welcoming home for spiritual freedom that enriches our lives and serves our world.”

The 2011 mission statement says in 15 words, what it took 57 words to say in 2003. Was the earlier mission 42 words more noble? Did the successful fulfillment of the 2003 mission, over 7 years, mean that 42 degrees of mission could be

retired, that the congregation could be relieved of 42 items of extra mission, like a spacecraft releasing boosters after reaching a desired celestial altitude?

Our mission didn't change, the description of our mission changed. Our mutual charge was not dismissed, it was simply distilled. Consider the actions intended—building, welcoming, enriching, serving. These words challenge stasis and call for creativity, for engagement, for liveliness. I like the reboot, not only because I was here to participate in its creation, but also because the language suggests capacities altogether religious—hospitality, theological latitude, personal and social momentum.

What was here begun continues. We are building this church and the work goes on. Sometimes with changes in brick and mortar, but far more often with changes in the men and women who constitute this body with passion and purpose. Gratified by what nourishment we have received ourselves, we seek to set a table deep and wide that others may join us and share in the figurative meal we present. Indeed, to be welcoming is to be caring and kind, but it is also to be vulnerable and adaptive.

To be religiously free is to be unfettered by tradition that no longer enlightens, and to be released from code and creed that inhibit human intellect and erects walls where there ought to be doorways. This freedom is not permission to be reckless and satiated by self-interest only, rather there is reasonable restraint even in freedom that asks of us compassion, discernment, and soulful maturity.

Our lot, individual and collective, whatever disappointments fall or trials emerge, is enriched by the disciplined free pursuit of religious expression and integrity. We know our discovery is no shield against dysfunction nor misfortune, but the perspective we kindle here grants an acceptance of what must be endured and an insistence to remedy all that can be changed for the good of ourselves, our brothers, our sisters, our planet.

It remains our hope that our daunting and delightful assignment instills within us a receptive gratitude such that we cannot help but to act generously from its impulse. Aware of what we have, and are able to do, alert to all we enjoy at the free hearth of this historic house, we are at our best, compelled to address the perennial needs of our wonderful, but wounded world.

Like many others here, last night, my wife and I were present in Gage Hall to hear the wonderful music of Steve Simon and the Kings of Jazz and guest vocalist Johanna Grussner-Danielsson. I like to sit in the back of church events, because in addition to taking in the tunes or the talk, I enjoy watching you. I like the sense of tribe, of surrogate or chosen family. Though, given our size, in truth much of our relationship is more symbolic than substantive. However, I do feel that I know a good number of you, with some intimacy and shared experiences, and I feel known by you in similar ways. And I know many of you have developed sincere and lasting friendships with fellow members.

I appreciate these connections, and look to them (that is, to you) for support and synergy, but I must also look beyond all I think I know about our congregation, our mission, our welcome.

On the first of July, soon after the Emanuel murders that so rocked our city and souls, I received an unusual call from a local deputy sheriff. He was calling to inquire about a gentleman whom he had reason to believe was connected with us. I did not recognize the name, nor the man in the photograph the officer provided. Later that same day, a thoughtful email arrived from a woman in England. Her brother, here in Charleston, had written her with his appreciation for this church.

“Earlier this year my brother, Thomas . . . , wrote to my sister and I that he had attended several of your services at the Unitarian Church. He was not a church goer but said that your sermons were particularly interesting and he found your [congregation’s worship] refreshing and sound.

We thought that perhaps you might appreciate what Thomas said about you and your church in his last e-mails to us.

February 3 “...I mentioned my visit to a Unitarian ‘church’ service last week. I very much enjoyed it and went again this last Sunday. Not quite as inspirational but very good. Of course the Unitarians are basically agnostic; ... Think Emerson and Thoreau.

The services are beautiful and up-lifting. The ‘minister’ ... speaks to the congregation as a neighbor might. Often quite humorous. They have a

terrific choir and they feature solo instrumentalists ... This last Sunday featured a guest trumpeter who played 2 beautiful pieces from Bach and Handel. Very moving. The Sunday prior had a flutist.

The first Sunday [was] about T.S. Eliot, maybe the best poet of the early 20th century and one I have read some of. This last Sunday Darwinism and Evolution were [the] main themes. I made a point of seeking Mr. Reed out after both 'sermons' to extend my thanks. This past Sunday he gave me a big smile, as if to say 'I can see you get it.' I think I might become a Sunday regular, at least for now.

February 25th "... I felt a little awkward when one of the ushers recognized me and asked why I was not wearing a member's name-tag. (*That's an attentive usher. Whoever you are, thanks.*) I sheepishly said I was still undecided on joining. It made me realize that the nihilist in me was battling the optimist in me. ... [The] sermon was on love, not in the intoxicating, physical sense of young relationships nor familial love. It was about public love ... [The] point was that once we establish this kind of love, all things will begin to fall into place. As I was walking out, I felt like I had a grinning [nihilist] ... on one shoulder, shaking his head, and [the optimistic] Rev. Reed on the other shoulder, nodding his head.

March 7th "... [The service] was again very good and I want to [attend next Sunday]...Selma, about the famous and violent civil rights march in Alabama in the 60's. I'll let you know how it comes out. ... Do they have a Unitarian church near you guys? If so, check it out."

(The sister closes, saying) "We just thought you might like to know how much Thomas thought of you and your church. Many thanks for giving him such blessings. Go well, (name withheld) and (name withheld)"

Here is what I know now, that I did not know then. During the time he visited here, unbeknownst to us, Thomas was living at One80 Place, our nearby crisis shelter. About him, I know only what I have read you. Thomas, was killed on Monday, June 29, while crossing [one of our busy highways]. His sister wrote, "He was a

good and intelligent man who hit upon hard times over the last couple of years. Thank you for the refreshment that he found in your church.”

This is not meant to praise us for extraordinary gestures, for none of us knew Thomas’ circumstances, and I regret, and confess, that I do not recall the encounters he described. *This is meant* to acknowledge what we think we know—we think we know who crosses our doorway, who traverses here among us, yet we do not. We can never fully know all the life that is brought to the altar of the quiet beacon that is this church. Obviously Thomas was paying attention while here and was nourished—he wrote more about us than what I read, and clearly, he appreciated your gentle welcome. Who knows? His visits here may have been the most humanizing encounters of his week.

Our mission included Thomas, and it includes each of you, and also all those whom we have yet to meet. We are a wayside stop on the road to Ithaca. Some stop and inhabit these walls only for a season, and others abide here for many years. Ministers, and musicians, and Vestries, and so much more will change. And over time, words will be added, sentences will be taken away, but in essence, our mission to build a welcoming home will remain.

So as you set out for Ithaca ... “Hope your road is a long one. May there be many summer mornings when, with what pleasure, what joy, you enter harbors you’re seeing for the first time;...

Keep Ithaca always in your mind. Arriving there is what you’re destined for. But don’t hurry the journey at all. Better if it lasts for years, so you’re old by the time you reach the island, wealthy with all you’ve gained on the way, not expecting Ithaca to make you rich.

And if you find her poor, Ithaca won’t have fooled you. Wise as you will have become, so full of experience, you’ll have understood by then what these Ithacas mean.”³ Welcome home. AMEN.

³ “Ithaca,” C.P. Cavafy, translated by Edmund Keeley & Philip Sherrard

Reading Before the Sermon

Ithaca

As you set out for Ithaca
hope your road is a long one, full of adventure, full of discovery.
Laistrygonians, Cyclops, angry Poseidon—don't be afraid of them:
you'll never find things like that on your way
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare excitement stirs your spirit and your body.
Laistrygonians, Cyclops, wild Poseidon—you won't encounter them
unless you bring them along inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.

Hope your road is a long one.
May there be many summer mornings when, with what pleasure, what joy,
you enter harbors you're seeing for the first time;
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
sensual perfume of every kind—as many sensual perfumes as you can;
and may you visit many Egyptian cities to learn
and go on learning from their scholars.

Keep Ithaca always in your mind. Arriving there is what you're destined for.
But don't hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years, so you're old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you've gained on the way, not expecting Ithaca to make you rich.
Ithaca gave you the marvelous journey. Without her you wouldn't have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaca won't have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you'll have understood by then what these Ithacas mean.

—C.P. Cavafy (1863-1933)
translated by Edmund Keeley & Philip Sherrard