

Imagining Our Future

June 6th, 2010

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Sermon

Imagine with me, if you will, all sorts of eyes: bloodshot eyes, shifty eyes, soulful eyes, black eyes. Imagine what it would be like to have eyes that are always out of focus. Imagine that it takes a long time for you to adjust between near and far vision. Imagine not taking the time to seek corrective lenses for this blurriness. Imagine, if you need reading glasses like me, not being able to find your reading glasses and staring at the morning paper in frustration.

How would you adapt to living without clear vision?

It has been said that the eyes are the windows of the soul, because they are the part of our face that most clearly communicates our passions, our vitality, and our heart. Congregations have souls too, and the eyes of a congregation, our *vision*, tell others about our vitality, our sense of ministry. Like many of us, over time the vision of a congregation begins to get blurry, out of focus, and we may need to invest some time looking for those corrective lenses.

This congregation is now in the very beginning of a process of defining its vision for the future, a process that we hope to have completed in about a year. During this process, the leadership of the congregation will be engaging all of us in various ways so that together we can consider, what *is* the *soul* of this congregation? We've started the process with Bill Rasor's Talking Circles, the last of which will be held next Sunday, where we've focused on our identity, our sense of purpose, and our relationship with the greater community. We will be holding cottage meetings in July to continue these conversations in smaller groups. Our end products of this year-long project will be a new vision statement (where we hope to be in 5 or 10 years), a mission statement (who we are and why we exist), possibly a revised covenant, and some guidelines for what happens when the covenant is seriously broken.

We will be engaging the congregation at each step of the way. And for the next year, until this process is finished, this covered basket will stay on the table in the foyer for you to add your comments, suggestions and dreams for the future.

Some of you may ask, why do we need to do this, when we already have a mission/covenant statement, the one that's on the back page of your order of service? The simple answer is that just like many of us, congregations need to have their vision checked every few years. At least every five years. Why? Because it needs to be a statement of the *gathered community*. Look around you. How many people do you see who were not here when our mission was created? What was written was not written by *this* gathered community, and when that happens, we lose energy and focus.

When I was going through the candidating process toward being called as your minister, there were several things in the documents I received from this congregation that strongly suggested that our focus had become blurred. The first thing I noticed was that the mission and vision statements of the congregation were nowhere in the documents! Now, when a minister is considering whether a congregation would be a good match, that's one of the first things she'll look for... how does the congregation see themselves? It's important to see whether the way the congregation sees themselves, the ministry they see themselves engaged in, is similar to what the minister feels called to do. But those statements were not included, so it seemed to me that if they existed, they seemed irrelevant to the congregation.

The second clue: on the congregational record there is a question that asks: "Does the congregation have a mission – not a mission statement, but a glowing coal at its center – and if so, what is it?" The search committee left the space beneath this question blank. The third clue was this: the biggest challenges listed in the congregational record were burnout among leaders and retention of members and friends. Folks, these are both classic, classic examples of a congregation with blurred vision.

When I took a church history class at Duke many years ago, I remember our professor saying that for him, the definition of a liberal church is one that is not afraid to look at what it is doing and why, and it is often this self-critique that leads the way for more conservative traditions to change as well. He then added that when the liberal church becomes fearful of self-critique, or won't take the time, it becomes irrelevant and unable to lead.

We cannot be afraid of taking the time to look at what we're doing and why. And this takes all of us! The soul of a congregation shines through its vision of the future and its mission in the world. *That* is the glowing coal at its center. Not the minister, not the members, but the *mission*. It is time for some self-critique, to look at what we're doing and why. And then to condense that sense of mission into a single pithy sentence so that we can live with it. So you don't have to look on the back of your order of service to remember it. Something short enough to put on a bumper sticker; powerful enough that you'd want it on a T-shirt you could wear in downtown Hillsborough; memorable enough that when someone asks you what we do or believe here, you can repeat it. A single sentence that is useful enough to be used in congregational meetings to guide decision-making; current enough so that when someone stands here on Sunday mornings and says, "Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough where we thus-and-so", it feels real to every member and friend in the room, and tells guests what we're doing and why.

Dan Hotchkiss, in his book *Governance and Ministry*, says that ultimately it is the vision and mission of a congregation that owns it. The congregation's bottom line is the degree to which its mission is achieved, and its vision becomes real.

What we will be engaged in this year is more than strategic planning. These will be Holy Conversations because they will touch on who we are, what we hold most dear, and ultimately, what we are called to be faithful to. We will explore our differences and our similarities. We will risk saying what we believe to be important. As we share our stories, memories and hopes for the future, may we be mindful that what we are ultimately reaching for is to reclaim the soul of this community. May we bring to this task the thoughtfulness it deserves. May it be so, and blessed be.