

Sacred Change

Rev. Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
20 January 2013

Reflection on Building for the Future by Nancy Lee

My name is Nancy Lee and I am the Chair of the Building for the Future Task Force. One year into this process, I am here to give you my assessment of where we are. I am addressing you during a service because it is the easiest way to reach all of you who are unable to come to our Congregational Conversations.

During the fall, we undertook extensive consultations with the congregation – through Congregational meetings, questionnaires, focus groups, etc. We have analyzed all the information you gave us. Patterns are emerging, which I want to share with you today.

At the first Congregational Conversation in September, we discussed hopes and fears. People had a lot of anxiety about what we were getting into. The two main fears were money – what is this going to cost- and a fear that the process would be either too short and short-sighted or that it would be too long and drawn out. I sense that by now, people are feeling it has been going on forever and we need to come to some decisions.

We are working towards that goal and getting closer.
Here is what we have learned:

In this building, the areas that you mentioned as most unsatisfactory were accessibility, the kitchen, and space for youth.

In your ideal building of the future (whether here or elsewhere), you told us that the most important features are: accessibility; a kitchen capable of handling large gatherings; a quiet efficient heating, cooling and ventilating system; good acoustics in this hall; and a bigger nursery.

Interestingly, the staff use a measure used by church professionals to assess healthy and growing congregations and they have a different idea of what is important. Their list is topped by seating capacity, parking, and washrooms. Quite a difference!

Many of you are open to the idea of a move. Only 23% of you told us that it was very important that First stays at this location. 48% thought it was very important to stay within 5 kilometers of this site. 60% mentioned the importance of access by TTC.

It has also become clear that, while many of you are open to change, for some people this building will always be “good enough”.

I have to tell you this morning that the Task Force has concluded that living with a “good enough” building is not an option. Here is why:

1. **We are operating at capacity now.** We are crowded everywhere: Sunderland Hall is full most Sundays. Coffee hour is congested and noisy. The classrooms are too small for the way we teach children now. The nursery is at capacity. We do not have enough office space for the staff, let alone to support the work of the chaplains and lay pastoral care. Our washrooms are too few and too cramped. We have only one accessible washroom and no children’s washroom. We have only three parking spaces and nearby off-street parking has dwindled in recent years.
2. **Staff and volunteers are operating under stress** to provide the excellent services and programs we all enjoy. There is a high level of frustration with inadequate storage space, noise and space restrictions caused by tenants, a lack of privacy and security created by the layout, and the need to continually set up and reset rooms for different purposes. There is a longing for more inspiring spaces, good acoustics, and opportunities to try new things, such as video projection.
3. **We have an older building.** It has already been added onto twice, creating unsatisfactory heating and cooling, an awkward layout. It is not in good shape: we have un-insulated walls and windows, a leaky roof, and high maintenance costs. We have to address the major deficiencies you identified: accessibility, the kitchen the heating and cooling systems, acoustics, and the space for our children. We have to address the features that make a healthy and growing congregation (seating, parking, washrooms).
4. **Accessibility is a huge problem** and becoming worse as our congregation ages. We have several members who are unable to come any more because they can’t deal with the stairs and the lift. Any

renovation of this building will require that we bring the building up to code, which will be very costly.

We have an interesting dilemma.

Unlike many other denominations, we are growing. Some of you have suggested that the solution to dealing with growth is to have two services on Sundays. This is not an ideal solution. It is hard on both staff and volunteers and puts stresses on the congregation. However, it is something we may have to consider as a short-term solution.

Some of you think that things are OK for now, that we can manage and that renovations can wait. The Task Force respectfully disagrees with this approach. We have concluded that doing nothing, or making only cosmetic changes is not an option.

It stifles our growth and vitality. It hampers us from becoming all we could be:

- a vital force for liberal religion in Toronto
- a congregation more aligned to the economic and social realities of our city
- a congregation that incorporates more outreach and inclusivity
- a congregation that incorporates more environmental and social responsibility into our ministry.

If we want to be a thriving congregation with a future, we must act. We either have to rebuild this building or sell it and seek a new home elsewhere.

Now, a word about the financial reality.

We don't have any money to rebuild this building and waiting 10 years is not going to make a difference. We could fundraise from the congregation. We could take out a mortgage. We have no governing body above us that is going to fund this. We are on our own.

If we sell our building, we will have the capital to purchase property elsewhere and build on it or renovate an existing building. We will have the opportunity to get the building of our dreams. Our building (or rather the land it sits on) is our biggest capital asset. If we procrastinate and other development grows up around us, our land will lose value because developers will have less freedom to build and build higher.

It is a difficult decision to come to terms with. It is a crucial time in our life together as a congregation.

Here is how we plan to proceed.

With all this in mind, we are engaging the Toronto firm of Tafler Rylett Architects to do a feasibility study for us. They are the architects who designed the expansion at the Mississauga Unitarian Congregation and they are Unitarians themselves.

They will take the input you have provided and calculate our space needs. They will assess what critical changes could be accomplished at this site and give us some scenarios of what we might do if we sold and moved to another site.

We will bring these options, along with their costs, back to you by September.

You will have many more opportunities to comment and discuss in the coming months before you are asked to vote on how to proceed. Let me stress that no decisions have been made. The final decision will be by a vote of the membership.

Let us go forward into this with hope and respect for one another.

We will never all be in agreement – we are Unitarians after all. But may we come through this feeling that the process has been fair, that we have been heard, and that we can live with whatever outcome the congregation votes for.

I leave you with a reminder about the hopes that you identified at the first Congregational Conversation back in September.

- You hoped that we would have new facilities that will serve us in all we want to do now and into the future.
- You hoped that a new building would enable us to strengthen the image of Unitarians in Toronto.
- And you hoped that going through the process and working toward a decision together would make us a stronger congregation.

Sermon: “Sacred Change”

Well, I’ve got good news and I’ve got bad news.

The bad news is that our congregation’s pipe organ has gone missing.

The good news is that it went missing in the early 1950’s and has yet to be found!

I say that as, perhaps, the most devoted enthusiast of organ music in this room.

I’m the only person I know who seeks out organ recitals and has Bach preludes and Widor toccatas downloaded on my iphone.

For me, there’s nothing quite like the brilliant stirrings of a pipe organ.

I love the massive symphony of sound pouring forth from thousands of pipes, ranging from the size of a small pencil to the great 64-foot pedal stops that make my ear drums shudder.

And, yet, as much as I cherish organ music, as much as I love the sound of an organ on a Sunday morning, I know, in my heart of hearts, that organs aren’t the future.

Times and tastes change.

The story I’ve heard is that when our congregation moved from our former Gothic building on Jarvis Street in the early 1950’s, the organ simply, somehow, got lost.

Now, I have nothing to base this on, but it wouldn’t surprise me if the team who volunteered to move it had quietly decided some Sunday morning shortly beforehand that they had heard all the organ music they ever intended to. . .

I’m not exactly sure how you lose a large pipe organ, but it wouldn’t surprise me to learn someday that the rotting remnants of that instrument are resting somewhere out on the bottom of Lake Ontario.

Now, whatever the reason, those responsible—
or irresponsible, as the case may be—did us all a very big favour.

The membership of religious traditions with pipe organs
has been steadily declining for much of the past half-century.

The high-water mark in North America for Mainline and liberal Protestantism,
from which we emerged, was in the 1960's.

And, it's been pretty much downhill ever since.

Over the past few decades, the “Christian consensus,”
which held sway through several centuries of Canadian history
and defined so much of life in “Toronto the Good,”
has given way to the increasing secularization
of a radically diverse population living in the Postmodern era.

Many of us have lived through this transformation,
though we may not have thought much about it.

Long gone are the province's Sunday Laws that once prohibited
all manner of fun and commerce on the Sabbath.

Gone are the days when church attendance was the norm
and everything else happened on other days.

Far behind us is the time when people safely, if wrongly,
assumed their neighbours to be Christian—and Protestant, at that.

The era when this city was actively dominated by Anglicans and
Presbyterians and Methodists has, of course, long since passed.

That's why, today, it is all the more a radically counter-cultural act
to wake up on a Sunday morning and come to a place like this.

See what rebels you all are?!

A few months ago, I was at a party
with a number of people who work in Canadian film and television.

At one point, I found myself in an awkward conversation with a woman, something of a Toronto socialite, who asked what I do.

There was that temptation every minister faces in such moments—the desperate pull to explain that you work as a writer, or a tattoo artist, or the regional sales rep for company that makes leather dog chew toys... anything, really—to avoid being a buzzkill by explaining yourself to be a member of the clergy.

But, I told the truth, and, as often happens, the woman recoiled and let out a little incredulous gasp, as if to say, “does anyone really still do that anymore?”

As she shook her head from side to side, she said, “you know, my husband and I must know fifty couples in this city, and I can’t think of one of them that goes to church.”

I had no problem believing her.
We live in an increasingly secular city.

For good measure, I did try explaining that our congregation is quite a bit different from what the word “church” might typically conjure up. . .

Once upon a time, Unitarianism was filled with people who came to us as refugees from mostly Christian denominations. They came seeking religious freedom.

The founding purpose of this congregation was to be a beacon of religious freedom for the city of Toronto. Our first charter in 1845 declared as our guiding principle freedom of conscience in all matters of belief.

That set us apart at the time—even putting Unitarians at risk of discrimination and persecution. Eventually, Unitarians were recognised by the government and granted legal status. Over time, the Christian consensus in Canada itself began to liberalize. And we weren’t considered quite the heretics we had once been.

By the early decades of the 20th century, though—
Unitarianism in our congregation and elsewhere—
began to move beyond simply seeking religious freedom from creeds
to, in many ways, seeking freedom from religion itself.

For several decades this pulpit and our congregation
were defined by an edgy and unapologetic Humanism
that sought to throw off and throw out all the trappings of religion.

We were happy to be viewed as radicals once again!

Some of you still fondly remember my predecessor John Morgan
preaching in the 1960's about Communism and Chairman Mao
on Easter mornings rather than the more traditional themes
dictated by the day or by custom.

Over the past two or three decades, though,
in our congregation and across our religious movement,
the pendulum has swung back a bit toward the spiritual.

The tensions we've felt here as a result--
over language and candles and imagery—
have played out over and over again
in UU congregations across the continent.

I knock on wood as I say this,
but it feels that we have finally put
the most heated of those battles behind us.

My hope is that we are finding our way to a place
where we can genuinely appreciate our theological differences—
as well as differences of opinion and approach on all manner of issues.

As a people committed to freedom of conscience,
we must beware the subtle dangers of orthodoxy
if we are, in the words of Howard Thurman,
to “look well to the growing edge.”

For that—the growing, elusive edge—has been and must ever be
the sacred thread that we follow.

It is the “it” that the hymn we sang earlier speaks to—
the it that traces from the wisdom of the past
to the cusp of this present moment
to a future that none of us will ever fully enter.¹

The ongoing evolution within our faith
and the dramatic changes unfolding in the culture around us,
beg of us essential questions of who we are and who we aspire to be,
of what great purpose unites us in service
to one another and the world in which we live.

Earlier, you heard from Nancy
the up-to-date findings of our Building for the Future Task Force.

While many of the details may not have fully sunk in,
I hope what you heard is that “change is coming.”

But, I hope you also heard that change is already underway,
all around us, just as it always is and always has been.

It was Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher, who put it best:
“Change alone is unchanging.”

There isn’t and there’s never been a status quo to maintain.
We live our lives in a world of constant flux.
So much of life is simply a matter of keeping up.

In concrete terms, quite literally,
the neighbourhood around us is changing.

Our building is aging, and our needs as a congregation evolving.

The religious landscape beyond these walls,
is radically transforming with each passing year,
to say nothing of the larger issues facing society
such as climate change and ongoing economic uncertainty.

In light of all of this, the growing edge for a congregation such as ours
involves facing enormous challenges.

¹ Hymn “187, *Singing the Living Tradition*, “It Sounds Along the Ages.”

The demands of the future are daunting by any measure.

And, yet, I can't imagine feeling any better
about the hand that is ours to play,
for we are blessed with great gifts at a critical juncture in time.

Several years ago, when living in Boston,
there was a publicity campaign to mark the completion
of a large construction project in Back Bay that linked together
a number of swank shops and high-end stores
with a series of airy, climate-controlled corridors.

For the first time, Boston had a downtown shopping area
shielded from the elements in every season of the year.

The ads in the subway proclaimed: "Finally, the City of Boston has a soul."

One day, though, I noticed that someone,
obviously with magic marker in hand,
had taken to editing the signs in a pithy and pointed way.

The revised signs read: "Finally, the City of Boston has a *mall*."

Through the years, I have thought back many times
on that sacred bit of vandalism.

What makes for a city's soul?
Is it a place, or is it something held in trust by its citizens?
Can there be more than one? And who gets to decide?

I brought those questions with me to Toronto.
In fact, they were questions that drew me
to accept the call to be your minister.

I love this city.
It is a truly remarkable place to be,
and we are so fortunate (our mayoral soap-opera notwithstanding)
to be alive, here and now, as Toronto grapples with the future.

A travel essay in *The New York Times* recently summed it up so well:

Toronto is having a moment.

The explosion of human diversity,
the glorious mix of cultures,
the steady population growth
and the rapid transformation of our skyline
all contribute to an enviable vibe of possibility.

With these, of course, have come enormous challenges, as well,
as we struggle with sprawl and transit,
with cultural and economic differences,
and with trying to fully fund the budgets that we need
to sustain the bold experiment that is Toronto.

And in the midst of all of this—in this critical moment that is upon us—
I find myself deeply concerned for our city's soul.

Where is our moral centre?
Where are our leaders?
Where is our hope and our promise?
And who will call us to serve a good greater than ourselves?

I am struggling to see that centre, to find that soul, right now.
I don't find it dwelling at City Hall or Queen's Park;
I don't find it in The Eaton Centre or on Bay Street.
Sadly, I don't even sense it to be particularly alive and well
in most of the religious communities scattered across this city.

I long for us to fill that gap, to help serve that need.
I long for us to bring heart and soul to this city.

I long for us to be a true beacon of liberal religion,
to serve as a conscience for Toronto in the cause of justice and peace.

To be a place that calls people out beyond their differences
to live lives of integrity and purpose.

To be a place that models loving community
and shows to all what it means for people to come alive
and commit themselves to the healing of the world.

I realise that may sound far-fetched—
that it might seem naïve, if not grandiose.

But it is the cause to which I've committed my life,
and I believe it is the longing
that dwells at the heart of this beloved community.

I have heard you say in countless ways
that you want us to come together to make a more meaningful difference.

To do that more effectively will require us to be bold,
to take risks, to improvise and experiment.
To remind ourselves that we can do
whatever we set our hearts and minds to doing.

I, for one, believe this little loving laboratory of the human heart
can serve this city as a great and enduring Temple to the Spirit of Life.

Over the last many years,
I've visited some twenty or so cathedrals scattered about England.

I'm taken by these buildings—not merely because
of their astounding architecture and marvelous pipe organs—
but because of the place they have held for centuries,
and in some cases still hold,
as vital spiritual centres at the heart of their communities.

At its best, a cathedral was, historically, a focal point, a gathering place,
a centre for the arts and education,
for worship and inspiration, for science and spectacle,
a place to celebrate the great unfolding gift of life.
A spiritual hub that held a much larger community in orbit.

When I look to the future and of all of the challenges ahead,
I see a renewed need for such places in our world.

And I find myself wondering what it would mean for us
to create a uniquely Unitarian version of this old idea in Toronto.

It is hard to know what future generations of Unitarians are going to need.
I'm fairly certain they won't need pipe organs.

What they will need, I suspect, is a meeting place, a hub, a geographic centre, a meeting house where they are renewed in community and inspired and equipped to meet the needs of a hurting world.

We are approaching a crossroads where we must figure out how best to secure that spiritual home, that hub, for generations to come.

In your Orders of Service this morning, you'll find an insert titled "The Roller Coaster of Change."

I invite you to take it home, post it on your fridge, and commit it to memory, for we are already on that coaster, and the trip is underway.

You'll notice along the curve the range of emotions people pass through on their way through any significant change.

Truth is, right now, there are a number of cars on our coaster—with some of us careening down through anxiety and grief; some of us heading back up toward hope and excitement; and some of us, back in the caboose, only now figuring out that we're strapped in for what promises to be a wild and hopefully wonderful ride!

We will need to be gentle with ourselves and each other on this journey.

Whenever you find yourself encountering strong emotions, be they your own or those of others, I invite you to take a deep breath, to summon all that you know of compassion, and give thought to the roller coaster and the various stages of the ride.

To be sure, the journey we are on will be one of the hardest things we ever undertake as a congregation.

In the months and years ahead, we will almost certainly make some spectacular mistakes.

The stress we will be under will, at times, be very hard to bear.

But this trip is also an opportunity to practice and deepen our faith—to listen, to understand, to adapt and change

and remain relevant to our times.

In essence, to practice the fine art of being human, together.

Friends, we face an extraordinary moment.

Though we will certainly make mistakes along the way,
our only failure would be failure of nerve.

In the end, we will be judged not by the challenges we face,
but how we rise to meet them.

Let us, then, meet the future with courage.

Let us dream dreams worthy of our faith.

Let us embrace a vision that merits the commitment
of our hands and our hearts.

And let us buckle up, that we might learn to love the journey
just as much as the destination.

Amen.