

Embodying Our Values

UU Congregation of the Hudson Valley

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Three years ago, a momentous event happened in Boston. The Unitarian Universalist Association moved from 25 Beacon St. to 24 Farnsworth.

To understand the significance of this move, you have to understand that 25 Beacon Street was far more than a building, it was a historical heritage of major import. Proudly located next to the Massachusetts State House, it harked back to the days when the elite of Boston were Unitarian. According to my colleague, the Rev. Anthony Makar, “When the precursor of the Unitarian Universalist Association (or UUA for short) moved into the first 25 Beacon Street headquarters in 1886, it was on the other side of the Massachusetts State House. When they moved the headquarters 41 years later in 1927 they had enough political pull with the state legislature that a bill was passed to allow them to take their address with them.”

My first visit there was in 1999, when I went before the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, the body that oversees the credentialing of ministers. I loved the setting on Boston’s Beacon Hill, the beauty of the building, and the sense of history there. In a later visit, I encountered the eighth grade coming of age class from my home church in Illinois.

“It’s as close to a mecca as we’re going to have,” said the Rev. William G. Sinkford, former UUA president. Another former president, the Rev. John Buehrens, said he was sympathetic to concerns about the expensive renovation and maintenance issues. But he said 25 Beacon is a symbol of the movement’s mission. “Twenty-five Beacon comes right out of our tradition of being opposite town hall,” said Buehrens. “Its very presence is a constant education in what our historic mission is. And in the absence of a common theology, it’s all the more important that we have a common history.” He felt so strongly about it that he said the relocation plan made him want to “chain [him]self to the door to prevent” the sale of the building.”

Yet many UUs (especially those who worked there, I believe), saw 25 Beacon as “an archaic, ill-configured, energy-wasting, command-and-control style building with a broken elevator. UUA President until last April, Peter Morales led the effort to find new quarters for the association. Morales felt the old building, “reek[ed] of privilege and hierarchy.” To him, 25 Beacon was “a symbol of our past, not our future.”

What it boiled down to is that the old, historic building was unsuited for the modern age. Installing an Internet connection fast enough to meet the demand, a video production studio, and other needed technologies was prohibitively expensive because of the

antiquated construction and historic designation of the UUA's two office buildings. Part of 25 Beacon was not accessible to people with disabilities; the building also wasted energy and lacks adequate meeting and office space. The staff was spread between two buildings and had no common space to gather.

The search began with a range of criteria set by the administration after consulting with the staff. The criteria included a building recognizable on the outside as the home of the UUA and big enough for the staff to be under one roof, yet with as small an environmental footprint as possible. The building needed to have a mix of meeting and common areas of different sizes, accommodate cutting-edge technology, and be close to public transportation and welcoming to people with disabilities.

So despite the reluctance to let go of that treasured old building, the UUA relocated to 24 Farnsworth Street in May of 2014 after months of renovations. I have yet to visit the new headquarters, but I would like to. It took me some time to wrap my head around the change, yet in the end, I did. Despite my own reluctance to let go of that treasured historic place, I know that the move was needed. As Rev. Makar says, "Definitely the major thing revealed in the conversations surrounding the UUA's move to 24 Farnsworth Street ... is the principle that mission trumps building."

Mission trumps building.

The mission statement of this congregation is: (say it with me if you know it)
Inspired by love, our mission is
to seek our true nature, connect openly and deeply,
and act for justice.

When this congregation began in 1957, services were held at the Croton Community Nursery School. In the fall of 1959, there was a move to larger quarters shared with the Bennett Conservatory of Music. In June 1963, the congregation purchased this building with a mortgage from the Veatch Fund of the Shelter Rock UU congregation.

I imagine this building felt spacious and inviting at that time. The first building owned by the congregation, it was exciting. This is a beautiful sanctuary, the social hall and kitchen are nice spaces, and there's a sense of history to the place, even if it isn't historically yours.

But how well does this building embody the values of this congregation? Values of justice, of connection, of love. How well does the building show you care about children, about the elderly and those with mobility issues? How well does it invite new people in, and show them there's space for them?

Since I first interviewed about this position, I've been hearing about the building issue.

My understanding is that you have recognized for some time that this building isn't serving your needs, and have engaged in conversations about it over many years. In

2002, you actually engaged an architect, Michael Molinelli, to determine what it would take to make this building meet your needs. Given the difficulties brought out in the Molinelli report, you've looked into other possibilities. Being one of five mostly small UU congregations in Westchester County, you have looked into possibilities of merging with one or more of the others. You've looked at possibilities of moving, in particular to a more urban area where you could be of service to the local community in a way you aren't here.

The most recent conversations were just last year, when you participated in cottage meetings to talk about your priorities, then a survey to determine in a more consistent way what your priorities are in relation to your church home. I have read the Molinelli report, the documents summarizing the cottage meetings and the survey, and I've been in conversation with leaders of the congregation about the issues. I bring my perspective as a minister and as an outsider to you today.

My first impression was not favorable. I don't like basements, with their limited natural light, and underground feeling. The administrator's office and the RE rooms seemed small and unwholesome. I don't have issues with mold, but I understand these rooms have flooded in the past and might have mold. There is a de-humidifier running all the time that sits just inside the main entrance, which is the first thing newcomers encounter as they enter.

Another thing that contributes to the unpleasant feeling in the basement rooms is that the ceilings are low, too low according to building code. We lost a potential tenant because we can't rent downstairs space because it's not to code. If it's not good enough to rent out, it shouldn't be good enough for your own children. This year, I understand that RE enrollment and attendance is low enough that they haven't had to use the downstairs space—they use the back of the social hall. But perhaps the low attendance and enrollment has something to do with the fact that you put the children in that unsavory space? If you want your congregation to grow and thrive, you need families with children, and I would recommend you do everything possible to make them feel welcome.

The sanctuary is beautiful, but it's really too small. There's a rule of thumb for congregations that says new people coming in will turn away if they feel there's no room for them, and that happens when the sanctuary is at 80% capacity. When I look out on Sunday mornings, the sanctuary looks pretty full to me, especially in the back where a visitor would be looking to sit.

A serious issue with this building is that it is not accessible to people in wheelchairs, or walkers. Even if you put a ramp into the sanctuary, people still couldn't get from there to any other part of the building without going outside and around.

What would it take to improve the building?

Let me share a few quotes from the Molenelli report:

The buildings are not compliant with today's codes mostly due to the nature of the emergency exits and fire proofing of construction. The building is upgradeable to serve much of its current capacity, but expansion is very limited.

There are enough serious code violations for the [congregation] to consider making improvements regardless of any grandfathered conditions. If any substantial changes are made then many of the changes will become mandated. We believe that the correction of the code violations should drive any repair or maintenance program.

Because of the current ceiling limitation, the RE rooms in the basement need the floor excavated and other work to be brought to current code. This means rebuilding the entire floor in place. This would probably cost about \$440,000. This is probably not money well spent.

The existing site presents many problems to development mostly due to limitations of the parcel. The legal buildable area behind the church consists of inaccessible rocky terrain making construction extremely difficult and expensive. The site is also inadequate to handle the required all off-street parking necessary for the current or future functions.

The cost estimate the report gives to upgrade the upper level and the site and also improve the lower levels is – and remember, these are 2002 dollars – \$980,000. So almost a million dollars. And you still wouldn't have adequate parking.

A church architect says, “A church building that clearly communicates its congregation's story can lift the spirit, increase member engagement, and multiply its reach into the local community.” (Mel McGowan, September 7, 2017)

In the cottage meetings various options were discussed, and one statement strikes me as the beginning of a list of criteria for what is needed in your congregational home: “If we were to move, it would need to be worth it in terms of gaining a space with everything we want including great parking, an easy commute for all members, plenty of outdoor space, and ample room for offices, activities and events. It would be important for us to have more/better space to be able to rent out our facility as well.”

There is a pie chart in the document about the cottage meetings that displays how people feel about the various options. It looks like “Stay and Invest” is the biggest chunk of the pie, but if you take all the options with “move” in them, then moving is the clear winner. These include Move, Move-urban, Move-rural, Move-suburban, and Merge and Move. Although in a different report there is another pie chart with “Stay and Satellite” that makes staying come out ahead. In any case, the cottage meetings and survey do not constitute a vote. They were a way for the Board to get a sense of how the congregation feels about various options.

I get the impression you've had a lot of conversations, and there are a lot of options, but none of them feels quite right. I realize there is a lot of attachment to this building, in

large part for its location. Relocating poses a great risk of losing current members and friends, unless an ideal location can be found nearby. People love the sanctuary, but don't seem particularly attached to the rest of the building.

I was struck by one sentence in the summary of the cottage meetings: "The consensus is that the space we have right now does not support us living out our mission and will not hold strong in the future." There is reference to "our goal of owning a stronger, larger and more accessible building."

From my perspective, it seems this building is holding you back, and will continue to do so, even if you put hundreds of thousands of dollars into it. I believe staying here will keep your congregation small. Not that there's a guarantee of growth if you move, but there's no chance of it if you stay. There's just not room for much, if any, expansion, as the Molenelli report makes clear. And you can spend a fortune to make it accessible, with adequate classroom space, but still not have adequate parking.

It helps to have something concrete to capture the imagination. Recently, the Board went to look at a property that really captured my imagination. It was beautiful, and it was in this area. As it turns out, it's way too small, though if a sanctuary could be added on, it might still work. I'm aware of a small congregation in Delaware that purchased a house on a large property and added on a sanctuary. It serves them well. It's so much easier to get excited about a real place than about a vague possibility.

Right now, you are in limbo. There are things this building needs, even if you decide not to stay and invest the million dollars. How much do you want to invest in a building you may be leaving? This keeps coming up, and it will continue to come up. You need to do something. By doing nothing, by postponing planning, you are in effect actually choosing, but choosing the worst option of all, according to the survey results—that of stay and do the minimum.

I'd like to invite you to dream big and open your imaginations to the possibilities. Draw up a list of criteria, including size and location desires, and start watching the real estate market. Start saving money toward a down payment. Put this place on the market. Put the congregation in your will. The congregation recently received a \$20,000 bequest from Herb and Bobbi Lipton, members who have passed away. People might remember Bobbi for her love of the Yankees. Trust your Board of Trustees to act in your interest, and to keep you informed along the way. They'll be talking to you today, right after the service.

Take inspiration from Hare, who created not just a house, but a village with music and dancing. Take inspiration from Hattie May Wiatt, who saved 57 cents to help build a bigger church. Take inspiration from yourselves, who raised \$12,315 in the auction.

You have a dear, exciting, active congregation committed to justice. You are a beacon of hope for people from a wide geographic area. You can find the space to welcome

them all in, and you can afford it if you believe in your mission. I believe you can do it! I believe in you!