

Mission (Im)possible!
November 5, 2017
Rev. Otto O'Connor

So, I, uh had something totally different planned, but I found this cassette tape in my office and it says on it "play for whole congregation" so, uh, I'm going to put it in this tape player here and let's see what happens...

"Greetings, Secret Agents! You are currently at the First Parish in Malden, an historical Unitarian Universalist Congregation. You will find, in the pew in front of you, a piece of paper that has this church's vision statement on it on one side, and a series of questions on the other. You Mission, Secret Agents, if you choose to accept it, is to help this congregation write a new mission statement. This tape will self-destruct in 5 seconds..."

Wow. What was that? Who's voice was that? It was totally unfamiliar to me! **Note to online readers: It was totally my voice.*

I had this great service planned for working on our mission statement, but now we have to decide whether or not we are going to accept THIS mission.

I'm really, sorry, I should have planned for this.

But, uh, I guess we are a democracy, us Unitarian Universalists. So. Do you choose to accept this mission? To help this congregation achieve its vision? Please by a show of hands.

Looks like we have a majority. Ok... So, where should we get started?

Well, let's see. Let's start with some history. This vision statement, the one in your envelope, was created last year by gathering input from all of you. Let me read it again.

"We, the people of First Parish, are a welcoming mid-size congregation that brings its love beyond the walls of our church. We share our worship and gathering space with neighbors and allies for progressive change. We are challenged by our UU Principles and committed to justice and compassion for all, on Sunday and every day."

Hmmm and on the back it has a bunch of words... I think, I think here's where we're supposed to write down how we get from here to this vision statement.

Ok, so let's back up. Before you start writing and getting your ideas down on paper, let's think about this a little more... strategically.

There are three important statements a congregation should have.

One of them in the covenant. This is what we recite every Sunday morning. You can find it on the first page of the order of worship.

“We, the members of the First Parish in Malden, covenant in friendship to create together a community of respect, equality, openness, trust, and compassion. We pledge ourselves to hospitality, understanding, spiritual growth, sharing, and participation.”

This statement is about how we want to be with each other. A covenant is an agreement. People make a covenant when they get married, for example. It's a promise. An aspiration. Covenants, like ours, are not concrete, rather they are descriptive of how we aspire to be with each other. This is what people agree to when they become members of this community. It's a promise to respect each other. It's a promise to equality. It's a promise to participate in each other's growth. And it is primarily inward focused, as in, inward to the walls of this congregation. It even specifies “members” in it. It says nothing about how we act with those in our surrounding community.

A covenant can be broken. In fact, I guarantee you will break it. When a covenant is broken it's important to bring ourselves back into relationship. To admit where we fell short and strive to do better. And to have that understanding of others.

This Covenant is a large part of the reason we come to church. Not only because we expect others to behave in these ways towards us, but because it gives us a framework for how we are at our best in community. Communities are messy. We need these promises to help hold us together. And a covenant like this one calls us to be our best selves when we are in this space and with these people.

So that's the first important statements. The Covenant, the promises we make to each other and to this community at large.

The next important statement is the Vision Statement. The Vision Statement is what these mysterious people who left us these envelopes left for us. It's literally a vision of what we imagine the congregation could be, and what it will be with our work of transformation and change. It's a dream.

Which is to say, we are not, yet, fully the church in that statement. We have glimpses of it. But we are not fully that church.

And that's where the Mission Statement comes in. The Mission Statement is *how* we plan to get to that vision. It uses action words, it's short - maybe only a sentence, and serves as the bridge to getting to this vision we have for this congregation. And should be something we can point to when making decisions about how we move forward. Ideally, a mission statement will also express who we are, because we are a people of action, and those actions will show who we are and what we are known for.

And that's what we need to work on today (we did choose to accept this Mission, after all).

So here's where the papers and envelopes come in handy, I imagine. I can only guess what this mysterious voice wants us to do today.

Let's go point through point in our vision statement. As we go through, I will give you time to write down your thoughts about each point on the paper that we were mysteriously provided. I invite everyone to participate as they are able - whether this is your first time in our church or if you grew up here. Your perspective can be shared more broadly if you don't know the specifics of THIS church. Because here, we value everyone's input.

It starts by calling us welcoming. Are we welcoming? Welcoming for who? How does our worship service feel to those who come for the first time? Is our space welcoming? New people, you might have a particular insight into this.

We are doing some work on this welcome already. Our guest worship leader two weeks ago shared a workshop on the Brave Welcome, about what it means to feel truly welcomed. We are beginning to understand that different people need different things to feel welcomed. In order to be welcoming, we must figure out who we are welcoming and how. And what we can do to become a place of welcome, even more so than we are now.

So now let's take some time and write about what does welcoming look like to you. If you feel moved, jot down some words about welcome, states of being about welcome, or ways in which you could feel more welcomed.

Pause to write

The statement then says that we bring our love beyond the walls of the church. When I hear this I imagine us filling the streets in support of our neighbors and those in our surrounding community. But we already bring our love beyond these walls. Some of us volunteer, every week, with Bread of Life, for example, a ministry here in Malden to feed those in need. Some of us organize fundraisers, like the one last week that sent over \$750 to the people of Puerto Rico in their recovery from the Hurricane.

But what does bringing our love beyond these walls look like to you? Take some time to jot down some words and phrases that you associate with bringing love beyond the walls of this church.

Pause to write

Next, the vision statement talks about sharing our worship and gathering space with neighbors and allies for progressive change, I've seen that already happen - just this past week we hosted a city council forum with the Chinese Culture Connection and the American Association of Arab Women. How do we make it happen more? What would we need to make that happen? Take some time to jot down some thoughts about that.

Pause to write

Our vision says we are challenged by our UU principles. Our Unitarian Universalist Principles, which can be found at the front of your hymnal, are a set of values that are shared by all Unitarian Universalists congregations. If we are going to be challenged by them, we need to know them and all the things that they stand for. Let me read them and feel free to follow along.

“We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part”

How are we challenged by these? What would being challenged by them look like? Take the time to jot something down. Can you remember a time when you were challenged by one of these at church? Take some time to jot down your thoughts.

Pause to write

And finally, what does a commitment to justice look like? What about a commitment to compassion?

I know this congregation voted to display a Black Lives Matter banner last year, but has been stuck in the process of getting it approved. Does that show our commitment to justice? What about our involvement in public events?

And our compassion how far does it extend? Does it extend to the Malden community? To our neighbors? To each other? To ourselves? Take some time to jot down what compassion looks like when it is acted out in this church.

Pause to write

So, friends, by now you have all taken some time to reflect on the ways in which we can reach this goal, our vision statement, in the next five years.

Your elected leaders, the Parish Board (please stand folks!) and I will take this input and use it to come up with the Mission Statement at the next board meeting, so please make sure you place your papers in the basket on the way out. Of course, we have many many more words than would fit in a mission statement. And that’s ok, because a Mission Statement is only a part of this Mission we are trying to accomplish, the mission of this

church. All the things that you have written down are ideas for us to achieve this vision, and though they will not all be in the Mission statement, they are still part of the work that needs to be done and are valuable feedback for all of us.

So remember, this does not mean that you are off the hook this Mission: Impossible style request of us. While the board and leaders create the Mission Statement, it is up to us to execute this mission, to bring our church into the future and become this Vision.

So your Mission, my friends, if you choose to accept it, will take every one of us. It will take us using our Covenant to be together to create this church we dream about.

The good news is that you are already those people. The people who are creating this vision of this church. The people who are living our mission every day. Because how we are together, who we are together, and what we do together matters.

So I encourage you, especially if you are a member here, before you leave, to take a picture, make a copy, or write down some of the ideas on your paper before you turn them in, because on these paper are ways that we all can support the mission of this church.

Let us do together this sacred work of becoming the people and the church we want to become. This work will not always be easy, but it will be fulfilling. While we come to church as much for our mission as we do for our covenant. Church is a place to practice being the people we want to become. It is also a place where allowing ourselves to be transformed can transform our world.

So let us boldly and bravely look into the future of our faith and our world. And let us live out the mission of this congregation in our words and deeds beyond the walls of this sanctuary.

And now, Gwen and Miranda will play Ave Maria in honor of Hollis Durgin, a steadfast member of this church who died several years ago after whom our beloved Durgin Hall where you will join us for coffee hour was named. On a day where we discuss Mission, which is the core of what the church is and how it will be sustained, I believe it's fitting that we honor one of our great pillars, an ancestor who loved this church and its vision. May his spirit fill us as we envision the bright future of this congregation.

And lets us say together Amen. Amen