
Reading

“The Changing of the Foundations.” By Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. John Buehrens, from [A House For Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-First Century](#).

Sermon

When the Needham congregation was founded in 1711, this wasn't even the United States. It was a British colony and Unitarianism hadn't even made its way to this side of the Atlantic Ocean yet. The Needham congregation's roots were in the Puritan settlers who first came here, and it was the center of town life. Like many founding congregations, it was where all town meetings took place so it was the civic, social, political and religious center of town. That church burned down in 1773, three years before the United States gained independence from Britain. It was immediately rebuilt because no one could imagine a town without its church, especially because their world was ripped apart by war. As the unifying institution of the town, the church was going to be the place where the details of what it meant for Needham to be part of a new nation would be worked out amongst its people.

But by 1879, the center of town had shifted. There was now a railroad crossing near the edge of the old town, and that was where all the activity of the town now happened. What did the Needham church do? It bought property by the railroad, built a new foundation, and physically moved the building so that it was, once again, in the center of town, ready to be the anchor of its community. They had their new foundation, but they brought their history with them. It was a beautiful merging of past, present, and hopeful future.

So what does this mean? One of the most important things a religion has to do to stay alive is to stay relevant. You have to meet people where they are and speak to the reality of their lives. In 1879, that place was the railroad crossing, and obviously they chose well, because the Needham congregation is alive and well.

Part of what it means to be a vibrant faith tradition is to continually be engaged in the community around you, reading it, taking its temperature, watching its energy and its focus and passion, and your tradition has to meet your community in a way that connects to the core of how all those things you're seeing are affecting the real people you are called to serve. You always have to be asking, where is our railroad crossing? For the Needham congregation, staying relevant meant physically moving somewhere else. Staying relevant also means staying radically present to your world. The theology that you profess and teach and try to live by has to make sense, it has to work, within the culture of your day, or you become irrelevant, outdated, and possibly even dangerous.

This has been a big weekend for our congregation. We brought two consultants from the Unitarian Universalist Association to help us figure out where our railroad crossing is. We didn't invite them just cause we felt like shaking things up. We invited them because it's pretty clear that we've run out of room. Look at how full our sanctuary is, look at how full our religious education rooms are, look at how few parking spots there are left this morning. We've obviously done an exceptionally good job in the last few years figuring out where our railroad crossing is. The question is, where is our railroad crossing now? Is it still here, on 73 Strecker, or is it somewhere else?

We've learned a few things about railroad crossings the last couple years. We learned that the railroad crossing isn't always about a physical place or location. There were always worries that we couldn't grow on Strecker

because we didn't have street visibility. Well, you don't need street visibility anymore the way you used to. Our website is one of our biggest railroad crossings. 99% of those of you who have joined in the last four years, found us on the internet. And I dare say, that one of our best friends is the almighty GPS! We are one of the fastest growing congregations in the Unitarian Universalist Association, and we've done that on sleepy Strecker Rd.

The fact is, on some level, it doesn't matter where you are. We could be at Clarkson and 40, and if the theology we proclaimed didn't have the power to transform lives, we probably wouldn't exist anymore. If this community didn't have within itself a deep embracing of the spiritual discipline of radical hospitality, that says we never ever have the right to keep what we have here for ourselves, it wouldn't matter if we were at 270 and 40, we probably would be a 20 member congregation that was slowly dying.

Why do I say we never ever have the right to keep what we have here for ourselves? Because when you have something this precious, it is your moral responsibility to share it, over and over again, so that others can participate in the new life that is possible in a faith tradition that proclaims that love is more powerful than fear, that hope is more powerful than anger, that peace is more powerful than war, and that we are called not to live for ourselves, but always, for this wondrous and sometimes hurtful creation that we are in covenant with. We've been proclaiming this message for 500 years. We do not have the right to deny this to anyone because that presumes that what we have here belongs to us. The covenant doesn't belong to us, we belong to the covenant, and to say that there could possibly be a moment when we've grown enough, is to try and own something that isn't ours to own, and to deny what we have to others who have the right to take their place in the covenant and to receive new life through it.

We save lives. You'll hear it from many people here. We save lives. There's been a debate on facebook recently about whether Unitarian Universalists have anything to say about salvation. People will say we don't have a theology of salvation because we aren't focused on whether we go to heaven or hell. That just tells me that many of us aren't courageous enough yet to really internalize just how powerful this living tradition is, or that we've been blinded by simplistic understandings of salvation. We've allowed religious fundamentalists to claim religious language as solely their own and they've won for it and we've lost.

Unitarian Universalism absolutely has a theology of salvation, we've been proclaiming it for 500 years, and hopefully we'll be proclaiming it at least 500 more, and it proclaims that we are saved from selfish prideful lives, we are saved from hurtful and abusive religious traditions and social norms, we are saved from brokenness and isolation, we are saved from the dark places of the human soul and brought before the promise of reconciliation when we live from a place of deep abiding love, and hope and trust in ourselves and creation. This is how we find new life and this is how we guide our children in claiming their place in this utterly magnificent and wondrous thing that we call Life. For some of us, this is the closest thing we know and experience as God.

Why would we ever think we have the right to own this?

So, as our sanctuary fills, and as our religious education space fills, and as our parking lot fills, we have to ask the question, where is our railroad crossing? Is our railroad crossing at 73 Strecker Rd. or is it somewhere else? What is the best way to continue proclaiming our saving message?

Last January, we empowered a team called Emerson Tomorrow to make a recommendation. Stay or move? I've heard many of you talk about this since the day I stepped foot in this congregation as your minister six years ago. And it was high time to stop talking and starting doing something about it. So we asked this team, give your best shot. Stay or move? And, the team spent about 1 ½ months deliberating, and concluded that the answer was to move. There are too many drawbacks to this property and we do best to sell and relocate, preferably closer to Hwy 40. That recommendation unleashed a lot of anxiety in this congregation. For those

who always thought we should move, it was a huge vindication. But for those who think we should stay, it was a deep disappointment. On all sides, it raised the anxiety of the congregation, but it was ultimately good anxiety, because it caused us to ask some pretty big questions, like, what next? And so we called on the Unitarian Universalist Association, our national body, for help, and they suggested that it was high time to secure the services of consultants who specialize in helping churches like ours. We spent a good part of the early summer sending them mounds of paperwork and we've spent hours on the phone, and now we've been meeting with Dave Rickard and Bill Clontz since Friday afternoon and I want to thank both of you for how much you've done for us in the short time we've been together.

One of the recommendations they made is to slow down. Yes we are growing quickly, and we need to respond, but a false sense of urgency can be as harmful as doing nothing, especially in a religious democracy. Go too fast and you leave people behind and then no matter how great the project may be, you're forcing institutional toxicity into a system that could take years to recover. They praised us for the good start to our work, but urged us to pull back a bit, because we still need to do due diligence. We have a relatively good sense of the limitations of this property, but what are its possibilities? And did we hire an architect to confirm the limitations we believe are here? All of our opinions about what is possible and not possible are educated guesses. So they have strongly recommended that we hire an architect who knows Ellisville zoning laws to give us a thorough assessment of what is possible and not possible here. We can't really make an informed decision to stay or go without a full understanding of this property.

Now I imagine this is music to some ears and not others. Some in our congregation have dug in their heels, saying, "Move? Over my dead body!" and others are saying, "If we don't move now we lose it all!"

One of the things I've learned from serving five UU congregations is that we may not have fundamentalism in our theology, but we take our need for stability and create other fundamentalisms, and one of the places we often turn to is our property. We are property fundamentalists, thinking that if we just have the right building and the right location we'll be all the great things we say we are.

I'm going to ask everyone who has staked their claim with one position to pull back from your fundamentalism. At this point, we have to pull back to move forward. We have a lot of homework to do and our consultants have provided us a road map for how to get from here to there. They shared that road map this morning before the service, and they'll share it again in Adult Religious Education, and I'd encourage you to attend if you haven't had the chance to meet with them. One of our crowning theological features is open mindedness, and I'm going to ask us all to recommit to that foundational element of Unitarian Universalism, the element that is exactly what brings so many of you back, Sunday after Sunday.

In the end it doesn't matter where we are. It doesn't matter if we stay at 73 Strecker or if we move. What matters is that our process is a good one. What matters is that we stay truthful to our mission.

Where is our railroad crossing? It's not on 73 Strecker Rd., it's not at 40 and Clarkson, it's not even on the internet. It's in our covenant with all of creation, a covenant that says that love is more powerful than fear, that hope is more powerful than anger, that peace is more powerful than war, and that we are called not to live for ourselves, but always, for this wondrous and sometimes hurtful creation that calls us to its service. This is the railroad crossing that we are called to stake our claim with. If we keep that before us, we can't go wrong.

May the spirit be with you. Amen and blessed be.