



Letter of Greeting from Rev. Lee Bluemel and the North Parish of North Andover

Greetings from the state of Massachusetts, from the North Parish of North Andover, Unitarian Universalist! Our church was founded as a Puritan Congregation in 1645. We became officially Unitarian about the time that our current sanctuary was built, in 1836— when some members left to form a separate Congregational church. If you do the math, this means that the congregation has met for worship every Sunday for 364 years, and we've met in the same sanctuary for 173 years. Over that time, only 17 called ministers have served the congregation—an *average* of over 21 years per ministry.

The North Parish was the very first institution of our town, town meetings were held in the Meeting House for decades. The names of our founders are the names found on the street signs around the "Old Center", where our Meeting House sits overlooking the town green. Even today, a photograph of our building is on the front page of the town's website.

Our history is a fascinating one-- that of the first European settlers and all that followed on the east coast of our nation. North Parish ministers and members were intimately involved in the so-called "Indian Wars" and the Salem Witch trials of the 1600's. In our burial ground, there are graves of soldiers from the Revolutionary War, the Mexican War, the Civil War. We have witnessed all the civil rights struggles of our country— emancipation, women's suffrage, the Civil Rights Movement and now the gay and lesbian struggle for equality. It has witnessed sea-changes of religious and political thought, times of liberation and times of restriction such as the Great Awakening of the 1700's, McCarthyism of the 1950's and the rise of the Religious Right. We know the arc of history is long, and that we must try to help bend it toward justice.

We are grateful for the gifts our ancestors have given us, and proud of preserving our historic Meeting House and making it accessible— a 2.1 million dollar project that we recently finished after 7 years of planning and effort. But we are about so much more than our building and our history. We are about our people gathering in worship, religious education and outreach— bringing our faith to each other and out into the world.

In the past decade we became an official Welcoming Congregation for GBLT people; we acted and stood for equality when same-sex marriage was under debate. Despite our idyllic location, we are just a few miles up the road from one of the poorest cities in the state. We have supported the beginnings of two non-profits: Stand and Deliver MCAS Mentoring for urban high schoolers and Jericho Road Lawrence, which matches professionals with pro-bono projects at urban non-profits. We have a prison ministry team, a Transylvanian partner church, a bi-monthly Food Pantry and host recovery groups. We, too, sent 27 youth and adults to New Orleans several years ago!



This year, we are beginning the process to become a UUA Green Sanctuary- a church-wide effort to live our value of promoting the interdependent web of life. We'll also be re-organizing our social action structure and asking ourselves where we should put our energy now that the building project is done. How are we called? What should our focus be? Who doesn't know about us? We are located in a predominantly Catholic area, and even in New England, some people are prejudiced against Unitarian Universalism, many don't realize what we're all about, and still others are quite happy being secular liberals. We need to decide if and how we truly want to grow beyond past boundaries. We need to decide whether we have the will to start truly funding our budget and mission, rather than relying on the gifts of the past.

We invite you to visit us someday—perhaps especially at Christmas...when we put on our biggest fundraiser, a huge Christmas Fair that involves everyone, or have our candle-light services on Christmas Eve. Nothing could be more "New England" than sitting in our candle-lit sanctuary on Christmas Eve, especially when a light snow starts to drift down outside our huge sanctuary windows with their old, wavy panes of glass.

It can feel as if nothing has changed in 100 years— except, of course, many hearts and minds.

Here is a gift we would offer you today: the reminder that you are part of a long and worthy tradition with deep historical roots in this nation, and that from small beginnings great things can come. The twelve so-called "free-holders" who founded our congregation in 1645 could never have foreseen that their effort would not only survive but evolve through the centuries—to promote greater religious and personal freedom for all people.

May you and your founders be so unexpectedly blessed. We thank you for creating and keeping the flame of Unitarian Universalism alive in the Midwest, and wish you many blessings and triumphs in the year ahead.

Sincerely,

Rev. Lee Bluemel and the People of North Parish

Sermon

Bearing the Flame of Liberal Religion

It would be fair to say that most of us our here in the counties live in a newly constructed world. Some of our homes sit on land that as little as five years ago was farmland. We shop in new plazas. We drive on roads recently widened to accommodate the growing city. This property where we sit was a small farm when we purchased it in 1991. No doubt there are people who live in this community who have witnessed all these changes, but most of us have not. Many of us look elsewhere for our roots.



The same is true of this congregation. This is a young church, only 25 years old, planted in the county by First Unitarian St. Louis and Eliot Chapel in anticipation of suburban growth. It was a radical example of forward thinking by Rev. Earl Holt and Rev. John Robinson.

Our beginnings here were not smooth. The hope was to have full time ministry as soon as possible. That has happened in fits and starts. It took almost a decade to buy property. When this land was purchased in 1991, many neighbors didn't want us here. Some were convinced we were a dangerous liberal cult, and actively lobbied town council to deny us an occupancy permit. We got the permit, but with a whole list of restrictions and requirements. On the first Sunday we worshipped at this property, neighbors called the police and we were required to produce our permit in order continue the service. In suburban St. Louis, to be Unitarian Universalist is to be a minority. We often feel not like our neighbors, and sometimes intimidated by what feels to be a very conservative restrictive social environment. This affects how we experience ourselves as Unitarian Universalist.

How different this is from North Parish, with its three and a half century history, where streets are named after their founders, the church appears on the town's website, and its cemetery holds remains of those who fought in the Revolutionary, Mexican and Civil Wars. North Parish is embedded in American history. During the Salem Witch Trials, their minister was one of the first to say enough, especially when one of his daughters was accused. When fire and brimstone preachers combed through the countryside in the late 1800s, the church began a transformation. Some continued to buy into the belief that humanity is depraved and God is primarily a judge. Others began espousing a new Christian liberalism that saw humanity as good and God as benevolent and loving. They hoped the church could hold their differences, but when the liberal Unitarians clearly outnumbered the conservative Calvinists, the Calvinists left and started a new church. What this means, is that the Unitarians got the building and the communion silver, for at this time communion was still an important part of church life. 173 years later, old



timers in the Calvinist church which still exists will say from time to time that they should have gotten their half of the silver!

North Parish Unitarian Universalists feel themselves much more a part of their environment. Massachusetts is a liberal state. Many of their values are reflected back at them by society and by their state government. There are many ways to be progressive. And so, it can be a challenge to find their voice. It is not a voice they can define through opposition. So what makes them unique as religious liberals? It's a question they ask themselves over and over again.

It's different for us in Missouri. Every time I write a letter to the editor, we get hate mail. For my safety, my address and phone number are unlisted. Someone has taken to leaving scribbled notes pushed under the glass in our front sign declaring our eternal damnation or proclaiming that Jesus is the only way. This past summer, vandals broke into our sign and changed the lettering to say something much too vulgar to share here. We called the police and filed a report. We considered emptying our sign for a while, but decided that we were not going to give in to this deliberate act of intimidation. We need to be here, so we will continue to proclaim our liberal religious message of freedom and tolerance.

You bring your children here so that they can experience and learn different values than they might learn at school or from the playground. Sometimes this makes it harder for your children, because they feel themselves as outsiders. But most of you consider this to be a meaningful experience for them. They can learn how to be compassionate for others who feel themselves on the outside. They can learn how to bend their hearts and lives to the arc of justice.

Our ministry is to be a liberal religious presence in a community that is often not. You would not believe how often people come into my office in desperation, almost weeping to learn that we exist. So often our ministry is a



ministry of recovery. Helping people first of all to heal from past religious wounding, and then, to move beyond simple reaction to active reclaiming of their religious heritage in a way that gives them power through it. We are not about saving souls, but we are about saving lives.

And yet, like North Andover, we too have to keep asking ourselves, who are we? What is our purpose? What are we called to do next? Each of our churches has different challenges in how we go about answering those questions and each of us has different resources at our disposal to make our dreams happen. North Andover, for instance, has a large centuries old endowment. This means it's easy to be a bit... relaxed about money. Their current minister has not experienced one year in her decade of service where pledges collected were enough to cover expenses. They keep drawing down from their endowment and pledging levels reflect this reality. Many members don't see their individual pledges as making or breaking what is possible and there is a growing desire to change this, to have the membership take full responsibility for the ministries of the church.

With no endowment, we are very aware that what is possible is directly dependent on individual generosity. We have a sense of stewardship that is the envy of many Unitarian Universalist congregations. If you want something to happen here, you make it happen with your time and your money ... or ... it won't happen.

So at Emerson we have a sense of newness, a sense of every person mattering, of being on the edge, that our very existence is a risk that we recommit to day after day. At North Parish, there is a deep abiding sense of legacy, history, continuity, and security. And there are gifts and challenges for each way of being. We could probably benefit a lot by seeing ourselves as embedded in a centuries old faith with deep historical roots in this nation. We belong here. We can't simply make this an oasis, a private protected place to bemoan our social isolation. We are called to claim our place in our community, to stoke our chalice to burn so brightly that everyone knows who we are and what we stand for.



Both Emerson Chapel and North Andover Parish bear the flame of liberal witness, a witness that trusts personal experience that believes in questioning, that holds tradition seriously and lightly at the same time, and bears a deep commitment to justice. We raise up transformation – whether of ourselves, our community, or our world – as the essence of life and living.

We question not only what happens out there in the world, but also what happens within our religious movement. Because we do have this experience of being on the outside, it is important for us to look at who is on the outside within our religious movement. Sometimes we too would turn the sand, the shells and the water into grass. In the 1970s, we looked at the fact that more than 90% of our ministers were men, and began intentionally addressing sexism in our seminaries and our congregations. Today more than 51% of UU ministers are women. In the 1980s and 1990s, it became clear that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered people were actively discriminated against in our congregations. We began to intentionally address homophobia, and to date 62% of Unitarian Universalist congregations have gone through an intentional self-education process to be welcoming of lgbt people. In the late 90s and early 2000s, it is becoming clear that we remain almost an entirely white denomination and even though we have been working at racial integration since before the Civil War, there are still huge barriers for people of color in our religion.

Since the election of this nation's first black president, we are becoming more aware, sometimes painfully, of the invisible and not so invisible ways that racism infiltrates everything we do. This church exists because of racism. Suburban St. Louis developed not simply because of a growing population, but because as middle class blacks moved into white areas in the city of St. Louis, whites fled west. White flight created suburban St. Louis, making possible the conditions for the establishment of a new UU church. And even though Unitarian Universalists, including many in St. Louis, including many in this congregation, have long fought for racial equality, we have to acknowledge the truth that no one can live outside the racial realities of our country. We must ask the question, what does this mean for us and what does it ask of us?



This year's Association Sunday is dedicated to this question – what does a commitment to racial justice mean? Our collection this morning is dedicated to a series of initiatives aimed at reaffirming our commitment to racial equality in our movement and in our country. Listen to the former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Rev.

Bill Sinkford: <http://www.uua.org/images/video/143239.shtml>

We will most graciously receive this morning's offering for the work of this congregation and the work of our association.

Letter sent by Rev. Krista Taves to North Parish of North Andover Unitarian Universalist read at North Parish's service October 4, 2009

My name is Rev. Krista Taves and on behalf of Emerson Unitarian Universalist Chapel, Ellisville Missouri, I extend to you warmest greetings.

Our 25-year old congregation exists because the First Unitarian Church of St. Louis, and Eliot Unitarian Chapel decided that suburban St. Louis needed a UU church. In 1984 Emerson Chapel was born.

We rented any space we could get. Parents are not likely to forget a memorable Sunday when we worshipped outside the anatomy lab at the local chiropractic college. The kids went exploring and found more than they bargained for! In 1991 we bought 3-½ acres with an old ranch house. The living room became the sanctuary. The bedrooms became classrooms. The garage was office space. In 2002 we built a new sanctuary and have grown from 59 members to 95. It is possible we will need to consider tearing the old building down and build new office, teaching, and fellowship space. There is anxiety about how we would do this. We have no endowment and must have the pledges up front to make anything happen. But, we have incredible generosity. Our average pledge is \$2,200. We accomplish what we set our minds to, perhaps not as fast as we'd like, but we get there. For instance, the membership decided in 1999 they wanted a permanent minister. They had mostly experienced part time ministry and lay led leadership. It took until 2005, when they called me, for them to reach that goal.

We live in a very conservative part of the country. So much of our ministry is a healing ministry for those who have been wounded by Bible Belt Protestantism or heavy handed Catholicism.



When our current property was purchased, neighbors tried to prevent us from moving in. They saw Unitarian Universalism as a dangerous liberal cult. We got our occupancy permit, but with a long list of conditions. Still, neighbors called the police at our first service and we had to produce our permit to be able to worship. To this day, it remains difficult for some of our members to take public stands because they always fear repercussions

Every time I write a letter to the editor I receive hate mail. There are often handwritten notes pushed into our front sign threatening eternal damnation. This summer vandals broke into our sign and changed the lettering to something much too graphic to share.

To be a religious liberal in Missouri is to be an outsider. Our challenge is not to retreat in fear, because clearly, our witness is badly needed. We often say that we're not about saving souls. We're literally about saving lives. We see the truth of this every day.

This is our gift to you. Each of us bears a powerful witness. Sometimes bearing our witness calls us to live against the grain, and in doing so, we are saved every day. We have the responsibility to offer others the chance to be saved as we have been. May you be wonderfully blessed. Thank you for bestowing upon us a long heritage of liberal witness and bearing the flame of Unitarian Universalism all these centuries so that it might kindle the flame of hope across this nation.

In faith,

Rev. Krista Taves and the people of Emerson Unitarian Universalist Chapel.