

**Sustaining the Joyful Community**  
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This year has felt to me like one big turning point for our congregation. Like a fork in the road. In the fall, we had a congregational conversation about our mission statement and how to connect to our understanding of our congregation at its best. Out of this conversation has come a series of sermons about our mission statement.

Our mission statement says,

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Rutland exists to provide a joyful and mutually supportive community of all ages, while fostering spiritual growth and the search for personal truth for the free and creative expression of thought, feelings, and ideas; and to make a difference here in our own fellowship and in the wider community by working for a more tolerant, respectful, and compassionate world.

We've talked about pieces of this statement this year, trying to understand what it is really asking of us.

The meeting in the fall also led to the series of UU Minutes where members of the congregation tell us stories of the congregation at its best. We've heard a story of recent work for justice that engaged people of all ages in our congregation. We've heard a story of justice work from years ago that created a working partnership with a Catholic congregation and demonstrated radical hospitality to new immigrants to our community. We've heard a story about someone being welcomed and invited into leadership, and about how empowering that was. We have a few more of these stories to come before the year is out.

Then in February we had another congregational conversation, this time about our systems for making decisions and how they might be improved to help us become the congregation we want to be. The Board has been doing excellent work this year on our congregation as a system and on how to foster congregational health.

We are being called, together, to recommit to that which animates the spirit of our congregation. We are being invited to get excited about our mission, and work to live it out together. We are being invited to look at the way we do things and to make changes to the systems that act against our health as a congregation. This invitation has been coming, it seems to me, over and over this year. The invitation to move toward joyful community.

And with this invitation comes a question. What does it look like to say yes? What does it mean to accept the invitation to become the congregation we know we can be?

In a Unitarian Universalist congregation such as ours, the mission statement is an important statement of who we are and who we want to be together and in the world. But even more foundational to our congregation is our covenant. A covenant is a set of promises we make about how we will be together and what we will do together. The covenant of a Unitarian Universalist congregation is its heart, the thing that calls it into being and makes it come alive.

Our Covenant is a variation of one used in many Universalist congregations before the Unitarians and Universalists joined together, and it is still used by many Unitarian Universalist congregations today. We say it together at the start of every service to remind us of its importance. Let us say it together again now.

Love is the doctrine of this church,  
The quest for truth its sacrament, and  
Service is its prayer.  
To dwell together in peace,  
To seek knowledge in freedom,  
To serve humankind in fellowship,  
Thus do we covenant with each other,  
And with All.

I believe that the most important way that we can sustain our community, is to live by our covenant. This is the most important way we can say yes to the invitation to become the congregation we dream of. Living by our covenant means taking seriously our promises to put love at the center of our congregation, to dwell with others here in peace, to continue searching for truth and knowledge in ways that are grounded in love, and to live out our joint commitment to service. Keeping these promises makes the congregation come alive. We sustain our congregation by keeping our covenant.

Our covenant and our mission statement both ask us to live with love and compassion for one another. In our mission statement, this is expressed as providing a mutually supportive community. This love, support, and compassion is hugely important in congregational life. Without them, we will never become a joyful community. With love, support, and compassion, we are a joyful community, one that people want to join and stay in. In her UU Minute, Connie talked about the ways she has felt supported and empowered by our congregation. Many others have spoken about the feeling of support, inclusion, and love that they feel here. So, we need to keep this up! We sustain our congregation by showing each other love, compassion, and support.

Our covenant and mission statement also call us to the quest for truth. To me, this means, among other things, that we are called here to authenticity. As we pursue our own individual spiritual paths, we are called to bring our insights here. The Unitarian Universalist way is not to try to persuade each other, though we do learn from each other on occasion. It is also not our way to hide our spiritual journeys from each other. We are called to bring what we learn, know, experience, or wonder to each other. We are called

to share and celebrate our diversity of beliefs. We sustain our congregation by bringing our authentic selves here and by respecting the authentic selves of our fellow congregants.

Sustaining a congregation is founded upon these ideals, but it also takes practical contributions. Sustaining a congregation takes effort. This congregation requires the time and skills of a wide range of people. Each of us has something we can do to help out. Some of us work on coordinating and facilitating worship. Some of us play music. Some of us teach our children. Some of us care for our building. Some of us manage our congregation's money. Some of us usher people through the process of joining the congregation. Some of us care for the needs of individuals within the congregation. Some of us take care of logistics like the mail, the road sign, rentals of the building, maintaining our technology, etc. Some of us care for the big picture, overseeing the direction of the whole congregation and working to foster systematic strength and health. We sustain our congregation by helping out where we can.

Of course, sustaining the work of a congregation also requires financial commitment. And here, again, we are at a turning point this year. While the congregation was working toward calling a settled minister, money was put aside to help to pay the ministerial salary for a few years. Combined with some money from grants, this fund has been helping to pay for the ministry of the congregation since I became your half-time settled minister in 2009. As it happens, that money also helped us to weather the impact of the difficult economy we have experienced since that time. But that fund is empty now. This means, in practical terms, that we have a \$9,000 deficit in next year's budget to close.

There are several ways we could do that. We could commit to more fundraising. This would take sustained effort from many people, with several being willing to spend significant time in organizing and coordinating.

We could decide to cut the budget. Over the past few years, we have been cutting back on various areas in the budget. The two largest remaining lines in the budget are our mortgage and the cost of the congregation's staff. So, cutting the budget right now without raising more money would probably mean reducing the ministry position from half-time to something less.

Or we could decide to increase our financial commitment as members of the congregation. There are two ways we might do this. We could make a joint effort to raise the money to pay down our mortgage, which would mean a capital campaign. Or we could, as members of the congregation, step up our pledging. Or both. These two are not at all mutually exclusive.

At its most basic level, the choice before us is to take in more money, or to spend less money. To walk toward an expansive future together, or to retreat together into a smaller budget.

I hope that we will find a way to increase our income so that we can continue to say yes together to the invitations to live more fully into our mission and covenant. But I

recognize that this may not be possible. The economic world around us is nowhere near recovered yet. I know many of you are still experiencing the hardships the poor economy has brought with it. Each of us has to decide what we have to give in time and money to the congregation. And then we have to decide together how best to spend what we are so generously given in ways that have the most impact on our congregation.

During the canvass each year, we have a chance to consider what we will give to the congregation for the coming year. I hope that we will each take this opportunity and genuinely consider what we can and want to do to sustain our congregational community. Each of us has to make that decision for ourselves, but I hope it is one we will make thoughtfully. We sustain our congregation by giving generously as we are able.

This year has felt to me full of momentous turning points and opportunities, but really every year is a new opportunity. Every canvass is an opportunity to consider how we can help to sustain the congregation. Every year presents new opportunities to contribute time and energy to the congregation. Every time we are together, we have choices about how authentically to arrive, about how compassionately and supportively we will treat each other. Every day in the congregation we face moments of choice about whether and how we will keep our covenantal promises to each other. Every moment in the congregation is a moment in which we can decide to help sustain the joyful community we wish to be together.

May we take these opportunities as they come to us, and work together to build and sustain a joyful and mutually supportive community of all ages. May we become a place that fosters spiritual growth and the search for truth. May we be a congregation that encourages the free and creative expression of thoughts, feelings, and ideas. May we be a congregation of people that make a difference. And may we be a congregation that keeps our promises.

So may it be.

Amen.