

A Sense of Mission
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UU Congregation of Danbury
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Sermon:

There is a thriving church not far from here, called St. Paul's. It has 8000 members on the books. It also has a full-time staff of 51, and an operating budget of \$6 million. Each week, it packs the church for three Sunday services. Each year, it takes in 620 new members. It has a school, a bookstore, and a host of ministries.

A "successful," flourishing congregation, in other words. The kind that has a lot of endowment, yes? It's in a wealthy area, and its members have lots of money, right?

Well, actually – wrong! St. Paul Community Baptist Church is located in Brooklyn. And not trendy Brooklyn, but rather in East New York. When Johnny Ray Youngblood went there as pastor, it was considered one of New York City's worst slums.

East New York was a place one might call "God-forsaken." Its burned-over lots go on for miles. They're punctuated by bleak strip malls, and run-down tenements, and crack houses. For years, East New York had the most violence per capita of *any* section of the city. The police in that district wore "killing fields" T-shirts.

Here's another thing worth knowing about St. Paul's: It hasn't always been a 5000-member congregation! In 1974, only 84 people showed up to call Youngblood as its pastor. There were three people on staff. The budget was \$18,000.00. Furthermore, the church was bouncing checks! Bill collectors would show up on Sunday morning, in hopes of getting paid.

Back then, St. Paul's was preoccupied with its own survival – and survival was not a foregone conclusion. When Youngblood was called there, an older colleague told him he might as well be going to Alcatraz.

What sparked the turnaround?

Clearly, it wasn't great neighborhood demographics. And clearly it wasn't money. Actually the congregation is *still* struggling to pay its bills – it's just that the bills now run in the millions, rather than the thousands.

It wasn't because St. Paul's church is fundamentalist and people are looking for a rigid, secure faith. Religious liberals are sometimes quick to give that answer about large evangelical congregations – but it's only a rationalization for their own ineffectiveness.

It also wasn't because St. Paul's "guarantees salvation in the next world" – another liberal rationalization. The talk around St. Paul's is very much here-and-now. It wasn't even because Pastor Youngblood is a charismatic preacher – though maybe that helped a bit. No, what really sparked the turnaround – what really happened in the 1970s and 80s – is that the congregation started asking different questions of itself.

- It stopped asking, "How are we going to pay our bills?" and asked instead, "What do the times require of us?"
- It stopped asking questions about *money*, and began to ask questions about *mission*: "Given who we are, and where we are, what must we do?"
- It stopped asking, "How can we *survive* in this community?" and began to ask, "How do we *serve* this community?" And it came up with many different responses to that question: from AA groups and soup kitchens, to building several thousand affordable homes in the neighborhood.

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It's an inspiring story, written up in a good book, Samuel Freedman's *Upon This Rock*. Why do I share it this morning?

It's not because I think UUCD should become a 5000 member congregation. On the one hand, why not? But on the other, you shouldn't think you've failed if you only become, say, a 500 member congregation. No congregation should try to be a carbon copy of any other, but rather a more vibrant version of itself.

I share St. Paul's story for two reasons. First of all, this story tells us that a congregation's present does not *have* to limit its future. UUCD does not *have* to be limited by its current size or financial picture. What this congregation can *become* will of course grow out of what it is now – but it doesn't have to be defined by it.

Second, St. Paul's story tells us the importance of *a sense of mission*. By this, I don't mean a mission *statement*, but rather what someone has called "a glowing coal at the congregation's center." St. Paul's thrived because it figured out *why* it was there, and what it had to accomplish. It stopped asking, "how can we 'get' more members to pay the bills" and started asking, "how many people can we serve?"

Many church consultants now think that a driving sense of mission is the most important key to a congregation's success. Too many congregations, they say, are still thinking in terms of maintaining themselves as institutions. That worked in the 1950s, when people took "going to church" for granted. It won't work any more. Fifty years ago, American society was a "churched culture. But now it's something else – it's a "mission field."

People used to think of "missions" as places far away. But now the need is all around us – both material and spiritual.

People also used to think of "missions" in terms of "converting the heathen," and of saving souls for the next world. But these days, we know that "souls" are in jeopardy right here, right now.

People right here, right now, are faced with crises: financial crises, as we know – but also crises of disconnection, loss of meaning. Here on The Ridge, we're given the opportunity to be with people in their hurts and hopes. We're called to make the world – or our corner of it - safe for the human spirit.

What does a sense of mission do for a congregation?

First of all, it gets us thinking outward instead of inward. We can think of our flaming chalice as a symbol of mission. The bowl of the chalice, the container, represents the community inside the congregation: our members and friends, and our life together. And then there's the mission, which is the

flame rising from the bowl. The mission is what brings the chalice alive, and makes us visible to the wider community.

Here at UUCD, the sense of community is very strong, and precious. It's what you say brings you here, Sunday after Sunday. But if "community" becomes an end in itself, it becomes ingrown. It loses vitality. It verges on being a private club. What St. Exupèry said about relationships is true of congregations as well: "Love doesn't consist in gazing at each other. It consists in looking outward in the same direction." We are invited to take the love that we have found here, and shine it out into the wider community.

A second thing about a sense of mission is that it gives us drive and passion! Mohandas Gandhi is a perfect example of this. Before he discovered his life's work, he says he was riddled by "timidity, scarcity, jealousy, fear, and insecurity." But when he saw the terrible suffering of his people, "a vision was born in his mind and heart." This vision began to lead him, and the timidity and fear began to fall away.

Third, a sense of mission helps us make decisions. Let's face it – today's world bombards us with choices! And these choices are rarely between good and bad – they're usually between good and good! It's easy to become immobilized, thinking about all the great things we can do, and never doing any of them.

A sense of mission narrows things down. Stephen Covey, in his book *First Things First*, points out that "It's easy to say NO when there's a deeper YES burning inside." A sense of mission is about discovering our burning YES – and then moving into the world with passion and power.

Reading:

That businesses and other secular organizations have been speaking of vision, shared vision, and mission while the liberal congregations have tended to avoid such language is ironic. Perhaps the liberal church shies from those terms because it doesn't want to be misunderstood as encouraging wild-eyed visionaries or underwriting missionaries who might seek to impose on others a way of life or system of belief.

We would do better to overcome our timidity. The liberal religious heritage proposes a specific and astounding vision of a better way the world could be. Liberal congregations are healthiest to the extent that they take upon themselves the large and worthy mission of bringing that vision into being...

Here is one vision of a possible world. It is a world

- in which people sense their own worth deep down and enjoy being alive in a reality they experience with awe.
- in which people feel the worth of others.
- in which people take advantage of opportunities to develop and to express their gifts and values.
- in which people see their lives as arenas in which to live out those gifts and values – alone and with others – for the glory of self expression *and* the enrichment of the world.

Roy D. Phillips, *Transforming Liberal
Congregations for the New Millennium*
(St. Paul, MN: Unity Church – Unitarian, 1996)