

## Restoration on the Brink

Bruce Pollack-Johnson, Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration  
September 7, 2008

Was that beautiful, or what? Thank you so much, Gary, Jane, and all of you in the choir. Thanks also to Susan, Annabel, and the rest of the Theological Diversity Ministry for inviting us to do this service today. And thank you to every one of you who came today. I and the Multicultural Anti-Oppression Ministry really appreciate it. To show my appreciation, I got really dressed up, as those of you who know me can attest – look, no sneakers! And my *dress bandana*!

I believe that we in our congregation, members and friends of the UU Church of the Restoration, are at a delicate moment in our history. You might say we are facing some Troubled Waters.

I can see two main likely scenarios for our future in the next few years.

I call the first scenario **The Inertia Scenario**. In this scenario, we basically reject all that Chester, our minister until recently, represented. We focus on being lay-led, becoming a fellowship really, at least at first. We continue our current *de facto* overall neglect and de-valuing of Sunday School to the point where almost all of our current families with kids go to the Unitarian Society of Germantown or elsewhere. We end up stabilizing as an interesting and pretty diverse (though less diverse than a year ago) group of 80 nice adults with many interesting and excellent programs, perhaps eventually hiring a part-time minister.

I call the other scenario **The UUCR Community Actualization Scenario**. In this scenario, we work *from* the Mission Statement we crafted together in the 1990s and the Future Search Vision from a couple of years ago, consisting of 6 imperatives and goals for each through the next few years, building on the caring, intimacy, spirit, heart, and economic diversity that are connected to our Universalist heritage (as opposed to the more academic Unitarian side of UUism).

Ginny Vanderslice, Bonnie-Jeanne Casey, Harris Riordan, and many of us worked hard to come up with a mission statement that helped define who we are. It covered the basic UU principles, and highlighted our love of diverse inspiring music, social justice, caring about and for each other, being welcoming of diverse cultures of all kinds, and helping our kids and each other grow morally, ethically, and spiritually.

Chester, Barbara Bunkle, and Jim Walters were central in our Future Search process. We came up with 6 Imperatives as a community, and developed short- and long-range goals for each: (1) Religious Exploration, with special emphasis on kids and youth, (2) Anti-Racism, (3) Accessibility, (4) Theological Diversity, (5) Social Justice and Community Involvement, and (6) Growth. With the inspired leadership of Jim, Barbara, and Chester, we then totally re-designed our organizational structure to reflect these priorities, and have been fine-tuning this new design ever since. I hope you all realize how rare and wonderful this immediate and direct

implementation of a Vision and goals is in any organization! The 6 Imperatives were slightly consolidated into 5 Ministries, now called something like: (1) Religious Exploration, (2) Multi-Cultural/Anti-Oppression (which combines Anti-Racism and Accessibility, and includes working against homophobia and other oppressions as well), (3) Theological Diversity, (4) Social Justice and Community Involvement, and (5) Growth.

Here is how I see the Actualization Scenario playing out, in relation to the Imperatives and Ministries and their goals:

From the Religious Exploration Ministry, we truly focus on Sunday School kids and Youth, hiring a Religious Educator now for 15 hours per week to build and publicize the program and help us become more family friendly, and eventually building up to 20-30 hours per week in a few years.

From the Multi-Cultural/Anti-Oppression Ministry, we build upon the Anti-Racist and Anti-Oppression momentum that Chester generated and we continue to nourish and retain those attracted here by his welcoming spirit and work in this area by having an active ADORE (which stands for A Dialogue On Race and Ethnicity) program, at first for ourselves and later opened to the public. We offer at least one Jubilee anti-racism workshop every year, at first alternating Jubilee 1 one year and Jubilee 2 the next, then perhaps doing both each year. We form an anti-racism Transition Team after the Jubilee 2 this November 14-16, to work on rooting out vestiges of racism in our institutional structure that are inevitable in any organization created within a racist society. We *examine* and *learn from* our experience with Chester by examining how racism, homophobia, and classism *might* have been factors, whether small or large, in the way things worked out. We continue our support of the Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender (or LGBT) community. We fundraise for a wheelchair-accessible bathroom near Hale Lounge and build it within a year or two, so that we can hold public events that are truly fully wheelchair accessible. Then we start a major capital campaign to build an elevator, add Air Conditioning throughout our buildings, and become fully wheelchair accessible in every space of our buildings within a few more years.

From the Theological Diversity Ministry, we emphasize UU principles and the many types of traditions and spiritual practices that can support them, and create inspiring services with inspiring music.

From the Social Justice Ministry, we continue our strong Reconstruction, Inc., Anti-Gun-Violence, and other social justice and community involvement projects.

If we do all of the above things, and if the Growth Ministry lays the groundwork to foster and support growth, then we will achieve the growth that we have *claimed* we want for a couple of decades. This groundwork includes *publicizing* our services and programs and events, *satisfying* people's spiritual needs, *welcoming* people warmly when they visit, *integrating* them into the community, *nurturing* their talents and growth (which Chester also did very well), and *listening* to them and *using* their good new ideas. We should be able to grow by 5-10 members each year from our present numbers, and can apply for Pennsylvania Universalist Convention (or

PUC) and Chalice Lighters grants and use other resources of the Unitarian Universalist Association (the UUA) to help us.

I think I know which scenario most, if not all, of us want to see come about. But it won't happen by itself. In fact, I believe that simply retrenching to pre-Chester "business as usual" will lead us directly to the Inertia Scenario. I personally would consider this a disaster and an opportunity lost, but it could very easily happen if we don't take the bull by the horns and face up to our current reality. In this sense, I believe that Restoration *could* be on the brink of disaster. If this scenario played out, our son Jamie would not thrive here, and we would sadly have to look for another spiritual home for our family.

I ask you: Are we on the brink of disaster, or are we on the brink of greatness? The choice is up to us.

So: What can we do to ensure that we fulfill our potential and make the Actualization Scenario a reality? Here are my thoughts.

First, we need to *learn* from our experience with Chester, the good and the bad; we need to *reconcile* with each other; and we need to *heal* the wounds that were caused unintentionally by the petition to call a meeting to discuss whether or not to ask Chester to resign. We need to do this without *blaming* anyone for anything, but in order to *understand* as fully as possible *what* happened and *why* people did what they did, and in order to reconcile with each other. We need to listen to each other's stories, as a group and individually. The 2 authentic reconciliation meetings we have had, led by Portia and Paul and the Committee on Ministry (or COM) have been a *great* start. But I know that there are a significant number of UUCR members and friends who *still* feel *deeply* hurt by activities related to the petition, and especially the way that it felt non-inclusive and secretive. Some of these people have not felt comfortable or safe enough to even *come* to the first 2 reconciliation meetings. We need to continue these conversations at least this full year to really heal from what happened. This is critical to our being able to achieve the Actualization Scenario. Let's start by having individual conversations with those we feel most distant from in relation to the petition and Chester's resignation. After nearly two decades of involvement at Restoration, there is one thing I am sure of: I know that everyone here, even with all that happened related to the petition and Chester, is a truly good person, and that the intentions of *all* of us were the *very highest* they could be. We have *all* tried to do what we think is best for the congregation as a whole and in the long run, from our own individual idiosyncratic points of view. *So let's talk!*

As I mentioned earlier, we also need to learn from our experience with Chester by examining how racism, heterosexism, and class might have played a role in what happened. Clearly there were purely personality traits that many people felt made it difficult to work with Chester, and perhaps that even meant he was not well suited to being a settled parish minister. At the same time, we have all grown up in a racist, homophobic, and classist society, and so we *can't* have *avoided* unconsciously absorbing some of those attitudes and beliefs. This is our chance to *start to root them out*, as individuals *and as an institution*. Restoration has a proud history of fighting institutional racism in the legacy of Rudy Gelsey's formation of East Mount Airy Neighbors to fight racist redlining by realtors in the 1960s, one of the reasons why Mt. Airy

is so beautifully diverse and why many of us have chosen to live and worship here. My work with the Joseph Priestley District (the JPD) Journey Toward Wholeness anti-racism team, and the UUA's Sofia Betancourt's sermon to us last March, make it clear that Restoration is near the forefront in the JPD and the UUA as a whole across the US in the area of anti-racism work. We have a unique opportunity to push this even farther, and perhaps be at the very front of this work.

What can we each do as individuals to this end? It would be so great if we could *all* go to the first ADORE session on Wednesday, September 24<sup>th</sup> (as well as others to come later this year). We will share a potluck at 6:30, then this month we will learn about [how the radical right has framed certain issues to their advantage in the public sphere and how we progressives could turn that around], followed by listening to Rev. Jeremiah Wright's *full* sermon and discussing the issues these bring out. Paula Cole Jones created the ADORE program, and will be facilitating our first few. There is no need to commit to anything in the series – just come when you can. Anyone who has attended a Jubilee 1 workshop or equivalent in the past is also encouraged to come to the Jubilee 2 training workshop November 14-16. Having as many Board members and leaders with Jubilee 2 training as possible would be an amazing statement of our commitment to this Imperative. We will have information and registration forms at the social hour after the service. In addition, we can attend the Multi/Anti Town Meeting to be scheduled later this year, and the JPD Racial Justice Conference October 25 at 1<sup>st</sup> Church in Center City. And finally, we can support the formation of an anti-racism Transition Team to examine *how* we can move ever closer to being a truly anti-racist and anti-oppressive community.

From my reading and studying about anti-racism and anti-oppression, I realize how true it is in this area that if you are not a part of the solution, then you are a part of the problem. More dramatically, I believe that if you are not actively working *against* racism and other oppressions, then you are in fact contributing to making them *even worse*. Inaction is *not* neutral; it *supports* and *deepens* the existing oppression. White people created the concepts of racism (and whiteness, for that matter) in this country, and it is *our* job to *clean up* the *mess* we created. We can feel annoyed when people of color like Chester remind us of this, but we white folks are *free* to *choose* to *ignore* this reality if we want to (and thus *feed* the system of racism). People of color *cannot* ignore race, and that's not *their* fault – it's the fault of us white people. Guilt is awareness of a problem we've contributed to *without acting* to solve it. The solution is simple: Start acting! This work comes directly from the UU principles of the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; and the goal of a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. That's the beauty of UUism: working against oppression of all kinds is part of the fabric that binds us together; *it's part of our spiritual practice*. That's why we are such a natural choice for people of color, members of the LGBT community, people with disabilities, and all who are oppressed, and why we have such great potential for growth.

What else can we learn from our last 4-5 years and beyond? I propose a number of lessons, most of which come out of the superb deep thought and discussion of the BridgeBuilder Action Planning Team last winter.

1. We should **evaluate our congregation's Ministry** (including any minister or other staff) at least every other year (if not every year) to provide ourselves feedback and ideas about how we can improve and come closer to our aspirations for ourselves.
2. We need to **create a culture of conflict resolution rather than conflict avoidance** within our community, and create systems to support each other in that (such as mediators, ombudspeople, etc.), while honoring the UU imperative of a free pulpit.
3. We should **make sure all members and friends are aware of our Mission, Vision, goals, and agreements** with any minister or other staff, and periodically update these.
4. We need to **encourage communication** between *all* UUCR members and friends and staff and be as **inclusive in our decision-making** as possible. As mentioned before, we need to *listen* to each other! This comes directly from the UU principle of the use of democratic process within our congregations. For example, as we consider the proposal for a part-time interim minister, let's get the information out to the community as early and completely as possible, so we can have time to think and process and make a good decision on September 21<sup>st</sup>.
5. We need to **clarify the roles, responsibilities, and decision-making power** for the **selection and conduct of our worship services**.
6. We need to try to ensure that the COM, the Board, and all of our leadership are aware of, and make use of, **lessons, best practices, and resources of the UU movement**.
7. We need to make sure we have **adequate administrative, RE, and music support staff** appropriate to our size and goals.

Maybe we members and friends can do all or most of our Sunday services for most of this year, and maybe even longer. Maybe we could be happy with a minister who only does 2-3 services/sermons per month. But we do need someone to provide pastoral care and spiritual guidance for those who need it and to help us heal as a congregation, someone to take responsibility for Sunday School, someone to take responsibility for administration of our congregation, and strong leadership to keep us focused on who we are, who we want to be, and how to get there. Any of these tasks could be done by volunteers or paid staff, but they all *must* be done, and done *well*.

Is Restoration on the brink of disaster, or greatness? *I* say we *can* be on the brink of greatness, *if* we *all* are willing to commit whatever we can fit into our very busy lives and *care* enough to fulfill our potential. As the song says, I guess we'll have to do it while we're here! All we need is love. And I *truly* do love *all* of you!

Like a bridge over troubled waters, *I* will lay *me* down. How about *you*?

Let's get together, and go for it!