

What I Learned on My Sabbatical – Stories of 4 Other Congregations – and our own story

I had two goals for my sabbatical - one was to engage in opportunities for personal and spiritual renewal; the other was to visit other UU congregations to see how they do their Religious Education programs.

The first weekend I went to Kripalu, it is a yoga retreat center about 45 min from here. This program was called The Natural Singer. Its subtitle “Find Your True Voice and Break Free from Fear”. For me, the thought of singing in front of others, especially in my true voice, and fear go hand in hand. Ok, I thought, let me start my sabbatical with a bang or a bust. I’ll learn something either way.

The program leader, Claude Stein, is kind and insightful voice coach. We started out with a lot of group singing and then Claude told us, that during the course of the weekend, each of us was to sing a solo to the group; and then receive coaching from Claude. Ha! I decided that I needed a better voice to lead the songs in the monthly Family Chapel I lead in the big space of the Sanctuary. I sang “Swimming to the Other Side” –by Emma’s Revolution which we started singing every Family Chapel this year. . And then Claude gave me some advice. Learn the song well. And then play around with it; try it in different styles, and then lower the bar for yourself, because if people don’t want to listen to you, they won’t, even if you’re Ella Fitzgerald. You don’t have to fill the room. Sing it slower. Invite the other people.

Wow, that cracked me open. I had one idea of what I needed to do, which was to develop skills to fill the room as song leader and I found out that is not the way. I can go slower. I could offer an invitation. It got me thinking about the rest of my sabbatical.

Some Sundays we have a service that's for everybody and the children and youth join their families for the whole service. Mostly those are special events; like our welcome back service in Sept; a wheel of life service; Christmas; Easter; and end of year celebration. Other Sundays we have Sunday school, also known as Religious Education, or RE for the children and youth. Older children start their Sunday school sessions at 10:00, same as when the service starts. Younger children come to the first part of the service and stay through the story or once a month, they come to a family chapel which I lead in the Sanctuary; either way, then they go to Sunday school until 11:20.

I went to the 2 Unitarian Universalist congregations in Rochester, NY.

Rochester Unitarian is one of our largest UU congregations: 900 adults and 250 children and youth -which is not quite 3 times as big as Albany UU. They have two services and two sessions of Sunday school. Rochester Unitarian does have a particularly Unitarian slant – with emphasis on thought and reason as well as social justice. Also important to note is that First Unitarian has adopted the 8th UU principal which is a commitment to accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.”

The building itself is very modern. All the floors and walls are of grey concrete. The architect's idea was that the people bring life to the building and to the congregation.

Sheila Schuh, their DRE, Director of Religious Education, is a buddy of mine. Sheila dynamic within her congregation; she runs all the programming and supervises 6 staff members; and she presents workshops outside restorative justice and creating beloved community.

Sheila is very focused on pulling all the threads of the work of the congregation together in Sunday school. Each session of every Sunday school touches on the theme of the month and ends with time to think about

how the children or youth will carry the message into the week. Embodying the congregation's mission to *Listen, Open and Serve*.

On a typical morning at Rochester Unitarian, the children do not go to the adult service. Instead, the older groups start at 10:00, like us. The younger children start with a children's worship with Sheila and then they have follow up activities in their classrooms which are led by adult volunteer guides, like we do for our once a month Family Chapel. And while the younger children have their Sunday school, Sheila goes to visit the older groups.

Programming for those older group looks like ours: OWL, our program on human, world religions, and youth group. When Sheila pops in, they stop their session. And Sheila leads a mini version of the children's chapel. That way all the children and youth hear the same story and have time for reflection. One thing that was apparent is how Sheila is very consistent about the routines and rituals she uses. And this helps the children feel connected with the congregation.

I did note that out of 250 enrolled children (Let's say half come to either session of Sunday school) only about 14 children in Kindergarten through 4th grade were present at each Children's Chapel. And it was an important Sunday because their candidating minister was preaching. They do have two large middle school groups and a good sized high school group. But of the 12 youth in their Rite of Passage program, 3 were absent due to other activities.

I have three take-aways from Rochester Unitarian

- **Use one story each week to pull together what the adults and the children and youth are doing on Sunday morning. That way, families can talk at home to continue what the children learned and experienced in Sunday school.**
- **Consider the value of consistent use of rituals and having time for reflection. It really makes the children feel connected to the congregation**
- **And what about the 8th principle? Do we want to look more into adopting it at Albany UU?**

Moving on to Rochester Universalist. Only 4 miles from Rochester Unitarian; it's right downtown. And the building is much older, very classic "church" with stained glass windows depicting scenes from the life of Jesus. It also has more recent additions of 2 banners – one of symbols of world religions, the other a Black Lives Matter banner. Their building reflects their Universalist heritage which emphasizes spirituality, especially from the teachings of Jesus. Rochester Unitarian is much smaller and has a small child to adult ratio: 163 adult members and 20 children; no youth enrolled in RE. But they make the most of it. Youth and young adults are invited to take roles in the Sunday morning service. One young adult gave a testimonial about inclusion on the day I visited. Children come to the adult service and their DRE, Rev Michelle Yates, tells the story, which is on the theme of the month. Then the children leave for children's chapel. In that way it looks a lot like the big Unitarian church. Even with just a handful of children attending, Michelle made children's worship and RE important with rituals, reflection time and fun activities.

You'll see on the front of your service that a large office building looms over the church building. They are in busy part of downtown and this presents a challenge for them because is almost no free parking during the week. So, they do not have any meetings or programming during the weekdays. Michelle recognized a desire for opportunities for spiritual exploration from parents of young children and retirees in the congregation. So she created a program on finding meaning from the teachings of world religions and arranged to present it at the local library. She introduces herself as a UU minister at the beginning of the session, but the rest of the work is non-sectarian. Both Rochester Universalist members and members of the public come.

So, what lessons does Rochester Universalist have that might also benefit us in our RE program and fit in with the story of Albany UU?

Here's what I came up with:

- **Use what resources you have**
- **Remember that you do is important to the people you're with**
- **Using themes creates meaning and connections.**

I did travel out of New York State for the other two congregations. And I gotta tell you, there is nothing like a plane ticket to make you a celebrity. In these other 2 congregations, I was introduced as Leah Purcell, the DRE of Albany, NEW YORK. She's on SABBITACAL. And everyone said, "oh my!"

I got one of those the warm welcomes when visited Jefferson UU Church in Golden, CO– their tag line is "A Religious Home for the Liberal Spirit"

It's a very large congregation – 800 adults and 250 youth. They have a lovely modern set of buildings on a campus with a court yard, picnic tables, and playgrounds. They have two services and two sessions of RE. Their model looks a lot like ours in many ways. The children are either in the service or children's chapel before Sunday school. They use the Soul Matters themes. They have Our Whole Lives and a world religions course for middle schoolers. Their youth group has the same sorts of struggles and blessings that ours does. When I visited just 6 teens attended youth group, but there were having lots of fun tie-dying. Now the Sunday school for the younger children at Jefferson UU looks different than ours. Our tradition is to have of each group having their own curriculum. But at Jefferson each week, each the younger Sunday the groups uses the story from the service for their activities and reflection time. Another difference is that their DRE, Annie Scott, creates a monthly one-sheet newsletter on the theme of the month for the whole congregation that has reflection questions on the stories and suggestions for rituals and reflection time at home. And this is for everyone - whether you have kids at home or not.

Also, Annie also leads a Family Chapel, on the first Wednesday of the month based on the theme of the month. Now when she first told me about this, I was curious. How does she get families to church during the week? And when I visited, I found out the 2 reasons why. One: These were families with young children – mostly under 8 years old, not yet old enough to have most every night of the week scheduled with activities and with homework. And two, before the service they have a simple, inexpensive dinner that is

catered. It is so inviting for parents of young children have a meal that is prepared for them and they don't have to do the dishes. When I was there we had salad and pasta. Families look forward to this evening. Annie really stressed the catered dinner part.

What are the take-aways from Jefferson UU in Bolder?

- **Address the needs of families where they are**
- **Youth group can be hard, but worth it for the teens who are there**
- **Themes are awesome for making spiritual and interpersonal connections**

Finally, the congregation most different from ours, not in theological bent, but in the Sunday morning structure, was Emerson UU Congregation of Marietta, GA, which is outside Atlanta. They have an amazing building with 2 kitchens, lots of classrooms, a playground and a big outside greenspace. They are a young congregation: formed in 1982; and they have a lot of families. Only 175 adults, but almost 100 children and youth enrolled in RE. Naturally, this congregation is very focused on families as well as their social justice projects. Thirteen years ago they made bold move for their Sunday morning programming to the "two hour" model. Here's how it works: Each week, they start with the religious service at 9:45, which is for everyone, adults and children. There is a story for the children, after which there is childcare for children under 7, though many young children stay with their families for the whole service. Older children and teens stay for the service and there are always speaking roles in the service for them. And they have a regular 20 min sermon.

Then, after the service there is a 30-minute coffee hour for everyone with snacks. And they have a lot of food there. Some was brought in by congregants that morning; some left over from the week's events. There isn't any tabling – just 30 minutes of food and fellowship.

Starting at 11:15 sharp they have RE for all. Children and youth have their Sunday school sessions and adults choose from a selection of offerings for them – like Small Group Ministry; a presentation from a committee or council; and a discussion of the sermon with the minister. And everything

ends at promptly at 12:15. This means a long morning if you go to all of it. But some families come just to Coffee Hour and Sunday school or they just scoot in for Sunday school; some adults come just to the sermon and maybe Coffee Hour. Some folks come just to help with Coffee Hour.

The advantages I saw of this model are the choices and flexibility it allows

1. families with young children can stay together for whole the service or or use the childcare.
2. adults can attend the service and volunteer in Sunday school or they can engage in religious exploration for themselves.

What are the take-aways from Emerson UU?

- **Children and youth can be in the service and take part in the service**
- **You can streamline what *how* you do things in order to do *what* you want to do**
- **A bold thing can work if there is a value added and if there are choices for everyone.**

So there you have it – 4 visits and 4 sets of take-aways under 20 minutes.

I'm wondering.... Is there anything here resonated with you...or sparked something in you? Remember, I don't need to fill the room with my ideas. Each of us knows some part of the story of our congregation. How do you think any of this relates to the story of our congregation? How do you see Albany UU as a place help you live out your dreams?