

# The Risks of Relevance

2013 Confluence Lecture

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To begin, I invite you into a dilemma that I am facing.

Actually, it's not truly my dilemma, or not mine alone.  
It actually belongs to the congregation I serve in Toronto.

I share our dilemma with you, because, frankly,  
we could use your help in thinking through our options.

And, even more frankly, because I believe  
our dilemma and its implications will eventually affect us all—  
all of us who call ourselves Unitarians or Unitarian Universalists,  
wherever and in whatever ways we live out  
our liberal religious identity in this country.

So, the dilemma boils down to this: do we stay or do we go?

For the fourth time in our 168-year history,  
Toronto First is seriously contemplating a move.

In fact, the decision has been put the congregation as a choice:  
a choice between tearing down and completely reconstructing  
our current building, or seeking a new home someplace else in the city,  
where we would build from scratch  
or adapt an existing structure to better fit our changing needs.

This is an enormous decision, and, as you might suspect,  
the reasons behind it are many and complex.

As you may know, our congregation undertook  
a significant renovation of the building just twenty years ago,  
expanding the space in our sanctuary,  
making the building more accessible,

and resolving some of the illogical traffic patterns  
that emerged out of two prior expansions to the building.

The leadership twenty years ago was bold to take steps  
that gave the congregation a new lease on life for another generation.

They did everything they could do  
given the financial resources they had to work with at the time.

Yet, today, we find ourselves again struggling  
against the physical limitations of our building.

We are operating at capacity.  
Our building is often maxed out, especially on Sundays.  
We are crowded everywhere.

Our sanctuary hovers around being at least 80% full most Sundays,  
which is the dreaded danger zone  
where a congregation sees diminishing returns in attendance.

We may say we love and welcome everyone,  
but the truth is that we humans—especially in North America—  
don't really like to be crowded.  
We want our personal space when we worship.

We will squeeze in on occasion and for special events,  
but congregations that remain at 80% tend to constantly lose people  
who, ultimately, feel, quite literally, that there's not a place for them.

But, our challenges are not limited to just our sanctuary.

Coffee hour is sheer chaos in a room that is cramped, congested, and noisy.  
Our kitchen is too small and outdated to pull off large functions.

Our nursery is frequently at capacity.  
And our religious education classrooms are far too small  
for the ways we now teach children.

The days of teaching kids, week after week,

in a small room, sitting in tiny chairs around a table are fading fast.

The future of religious education involves kids having the room to move around, to engage in different activities, to explore, to be physical, and to play.

We also lack enough rooms for offices and for meetings. Our washrooms are too few and too cramped.

We have only three parking spaces for our congregation, half of which commutes by car on Sundays, even though easy parking in our neighbourhood has steadily disappeared by more than half over the past eight years and is certain to continue to do so, as multi-storey condo towers spring up all around us.

All of this puts enormous stress on the volunteers and staff who are charged with juggling the needs of an active congregation with the needs of the many outside rental tenants that significantly support our budget.

It turns out that there's often simply not enough "room at the inn" to do all that we're wanting and needing to do.

Because of our layout and the bleeding of noise between rooms, it's not at all uncommon to be sitting in a board meeting and hear the Broadway Showtune Group down the corridor belting out "There's No Business Like Show Business!" or "If I Were a Rich Man".

(Of course, sometimes, those are the very things we're thinking to ourselves in board meetings...!)

Last week, I was meeting in my office with a family to plan a memorial service while a group of small kids with percussion instruments sang, at full volume, "You are my Sunshine!" just down the hall.

It was incredibly sweet, but the part about "please don't take my sunshine away" was a bit awkward to endure while sitting with a family in mourning.

Our building, though relatively well-maintained,  
has many of the challenges that come with its age.

Major systems are now needing to be repaired or completely replaced.

Even though we've replaced large parts of it,  
we have a roof that often leaks.

Large parts of the building were built in a time when little concern  
was given to insulating walls and windows,  
and our cooling and heating systems struggle to keep up.

The hard fact is that we face a future of high maintenance and capital costs  
to keep our building in good working order.

Like most, if not all, of our congregations,  
we tend to defer maintenance in a pinch.

When budgets are tight, adding money to the building reserve fund  
is often the first thing to go.

We too easily balance our budgets by hoping against hope  
that this won't be the year when everything breaks down at once.

Most congregations can afford to make that bet from time-to-time,  
but, over the long-haul, if it becomes a habit,  
we turn our buildings into monuments to deferred maintenance  
and risk eventually not being able to afford to keep,  
let alone keep up, our religious homes.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, one of our biggest problems  
is that our building is not fully or adequately accessible—  
at least not by modern standards,  
or in the present-day sense of what it means  
to extend dignity and equality to those with mobility challenges.

We have a small lift, which is not really an elevator,  
in the back of our building.

To reach it, requires having to navigate three sets of doors,  
and then travelling to the end of a long hallway,  
almost the full length of our building.

To use the lift requires finding the tiny key that runs the thing  
and then mastering the patience to read the bizarre instructions  
required to operate this machine that moves at an astonishingly slow pace.

Beyond being awkward and slow, the lift is also dangerous.

A few months ago, I popped into the lift to put up a poster inside.

I hadn't planned to leave the first floor,  
so it didn't occur to me that I would need a key to let myself out.

The door shut behind me and I was then stuck.

Fortunately, I had my cell phone and could, with some embarrassment,  
call up the volunteer at the front desk and beg to be rescued.

She was kind enough to come quickly  
and let me out of solitary confinement.

(I can't imagine, though, what it would have been like to be locked in there  
in a wheelchair and without a phone on a slow day in the building.)

Our lift is also inadequate to the size of many modern wheelchairs  
and it's often not possible to squeeze in a second person—  
which can pose a real problem if the people needing the lift  
are without the capacity to operate it on their own.

This may all seem a minor inconvenience  
to most people in our congregation,  
but not to those who require the use of the lift  
in order to participate in the life of the congregation.

If we intend to be truly welcoming to differently-abled people,  
to make room for a diversity of ability, we are realizing  
we must find ways to extend to all people the full dignity due them.

Our current lift doesn't cut it.

So, as you can see, we have an interesting dilemma.

We are becoming increasingly aware of the ways our building is working against us.

And we are starting to understand that these frustrations may actually be threatening our long-term growth and vitality.

What we have learned over the past year is that trying to solve all of these problems while staying in our building would be tremendously costly.

Even electing to raise and spend millions of dollars (which I should point out that we don't have and likely couldn't raise) would allow us to address only some of the challenges, and certainly not all of them.

Some of our problems simply can't be solved at our present site.

If we stay, we are facing the prospect of living in a building we may eventually be unable to afford, without substantial growth in our membership and our giving—and, as it is, there's not a lot of physical room for growth.

So, as I mentioned before, we're also seriously considering moving.

The City of Toronto's master development plan calls for the "densification" of St. Clair Avenue, the street where our building stands.

In the future, it is very likely that high and medium rise condo towers will line the street around us.

Already, we now have a 19-story condo building less than a metre from our eastern wall.

Though it sometimes feels like we have a nosey neighbour

peering down at us all the time,  
it also means that, potentially, there is significant value in our land—  
or, more precisely, in the air above our building.

A developer could likely build a new structure on our lot  
with many more floors than the three we currently have.

If we were to decide to sell—and if we timed it at a point  
when the Toronto condo market didn't seem to be in free-fall—  
we would most likely have a significant and sufficient sum of money  
that, combined with whatever we could raise,  
would allow us to construct another building  
to serve us well into the future.

Added to all of this, there is now a sense of urgency.

The small building on the other side of us has recently gone on the market.

If it sells independently, without our being part of the deal,  
the congregation faces forever being stuck at 175 St. Clair,  
landlocked by tall towers on either side of us.

The value of our land—our most significant asset—  
would plummet, suddenly being of relatively little value,  
since it's unlikely the city would ever allow a taller building to be built  
on our property, if there were already tall buildings on either side.

Now, I realise my explanation of our situation  
has been a bit detailed and a little wonky.

But I share it with you—I share with you where we are at—  
because all of these concerns when taken together  
present pressing questions about not only our future,  
but about the future that Unitarianism is facing.

Before deciding what to do about our building,  
it's becoming clear that there's still so much more to be considered,  
so much to weigh that at first glance has little to do with a building.

If we were a business, after all, the financial case is pretty clear-cut. We would do well to maximize the value of our physical assets by cashing out when the market conditions are the most favourable.

But we, of course, are not a business.

We are a congregation—a human community that stretches back to 1845, that lives in the present moment, and that will extend, hopefully, far into a future none of us can even imagine.

The decision we will make in a few months' time, therefore,—to stay or to go—is monumental, because we have obligations to our past and our future, not merely to our present.

That means that the choice of doing nothing is unacceptable.

Change is happening all around us, and if we are to remain viable and relevant, we will have to adapt and evolve.

So, we need, very much, to get this right, which makes this decision as terrifying as it is thrilling.

I say that because neither option is the kind of thing you do without having a solid sense of your own identity.

You don't tear down your building if you don't know who you are.

And you don't put up a For Sale sign without giving some serious thought to what the future holds.

What's becoming clear is that this decision is not just about the building. It's about us. About what we most deeply aspire to be.

To get at that question of identity requires staring as hard as we can and as far as we can into the future to see the challenges and the opportunities that are there.

To ask ourselves what the religious landscape of this country

will look like in twenty years or fifty years or a hundred.

To question what shape religious communities will take in the future,  
and whether our message will be relevant a generation or two from now.

To ask ourselves what needs coming generations will have  
and whether we will be equipped to meet them?

To consider that maybe our future won't be congregationally based at all,  
but that we will become more a movement of people who call themselves Unitarian  
without necessarily being part of a specific community,  
or at least one that functions in the ways our congregations typically do.

Now, predicting the future is obviously impossible to do with precision.  
It carries with it the high risk of looking incredibly foolish down the road.

And, yet, to not pay attention to trends,  
to ignore the direction that things are going,  
is to risk facing the challenges of the future utterly unprepared.

Given our tiny numbers and the long-term financial challenges  
it seems so many of our congregations have,  
I believe our margin of error is far too small  
to not do everything in our power to prepare  
for the dramatic changes that most likely are ahead.

So, at the risk of sounding like Nostradamus,  
I want to share with you some of what I see.

Now, I wish I could claim to have special access  
to a magical crystal ball that's been sending clear signals to me  
of what the coming years will hold for Unitarianism in Canada—  
along with a handy road map of what we will have to do  
to remain relevant to the times in which we live  
and the times that are to come.

Unfortunately, I have no crystal ball to work with.

What I do have, though, is statistics!

Very conveniently, as you may have heard, the federal government's National Household Survey came out just last week, though its results aren't nearly as helpful or trustworthy as they might have been if the government hadn't scrapped the mandatory long-form census...

In addition to those numbers, I also draw on a great deal of wisdom that's been amassing over the last many years from various thinkers within our movement, including from recent year's Confluence lectures and keynote addresses.

I wish I could claim stunningly fresh and original insights. Maybe there are a few here.

But what I am offering you this morning is, mostly, a confluence, in the truest sense of the word—an attempt at synthesis, a merging and mingling of various bits of information and ideas about the future of religion—and the future of our religion.

The take-home point is this: the more things change, they aren't necessarily staying the same.

Recently, I told my congregation that I had for them a bit of good news and a bit of bad news.

The bad news is that our congregation's pipe organ has gone missing.

The good news is that it went missing in the early 1950's and has yet to be found!

I say that as, perhaps, the most devoted enthusiast of organ music in the congregation.

I'm the only person I know who seeks out organ recitals while on vacations and downloads Bach preludes and Widor toccatas to itunes.

For me, there's nothing quite like the brilliant stirrings of a big pipe organ.

I love the massive symphony of sound  
pouring forth from thousands of pipes,  
ranging from the size of a pencil  
to the great 64-foot pedal stops that make my ear drums rattle.

And, yet, as much as I cherish organ music,  
as much as I love the sound of a pipe organ on a Sunday morning,  
I know, in my heart of hearts, that organs aren't the future.

Times and tastes change.

One story I've heard is that when our congregation moved  
from our former Gothic building in downtown Toronto in the early 1950's,  
the organ simply, somehow, got lost.

Some say it wouldn't fit through the front doors of the new building,  
others report that it simply went missing.

Now, I really have nothing to base this on,  
but it wouldn't surprise me if the team who volunteered to move it  
had quietly decided some Sunday morning shortly beforehand  
that they had heard the last of the organ music they ever intended to hear...

I'm not exactly sure how you lose a large pipe organ,  
but it wouldn't surprise me to learn someday  
that the rotting remnants of that instrument  
are resting somewhere out on the bottom of Lake Ontario.

Now, whatever the reason, those responsible—  
or irresponsible, as the case may be—did Toronto First a very big favour.

You see, the membership of religious traditions with pipe organs  
has been on a steadily decline for much of the past half-century.

The high-water mark in North America for Mainline and liberal Protestantism,  
from which we emerged, was in the 1960's.

And, looking at the numbers,  
it's clear that it's been pretty much a downhill run ever since.

Over the past few decades, the “Christian consensus,” which held sway through several centuries of Canadian history and defined so much of life in Anglo, Protestant Canada, has given way to the increasing secularization of a radically diverse population.

Many of us have lived through this transformation, though we may not have thought much about it.

Long gone are the Sunday Laws in many of our cities that once prohibited all manner of fun and commerce on the Sabbath.

Gone are the days when church attendance was the norm and everything else happened on other days—including hockey games and road races.

Far behind us is the time when people could safely, if wrongly, assume their neighbours to be Christian.

The era when many of our cities were actively dominated by Anglicans and Presbyterians and Methodists has, of course, long since passed.

Which is why, today, it is all the more a radically counter-cultural act in this country to wake up on a Sunday morning and schlep to a house of worship—even one with Unitarian in the name.

A few months ago, I was at a party with a number of people who work in Canadian film and television.

At one point, I found myself in an awkward conversation with a woman, something of a Toronto socialite, who asked what I do.

There was that temptation every minister faces in such moments—the desperate pull to explain that I work as a writer, or a tattoo artist, or the regional sales rep for company that makes leather dog chew toys... anything, really—to avoid being a total buzzkill by introducing myself as a member of the clergy.

But, I told the truth, and, as often happens,  
the woman recoiled and let out a little incredulous gasp,  
as if to say, “does anyone really still do that anymore?”

As she shook her head from side to side, she said,  
“you know, my husband and I must know fifty couples in this city,  
and I can’t think of a single one of them that goes to church.”

I had no problem believing her.  
We live in increasingly secular times.

For good measure, I did try explaining  
that my congregation is quite a bit different  
from what the word “church” might typically conjure up. . .

Still, I had no expectation I would be seeing her in a service anytime soon.  
She had no interest in what we are selling.

To be relevant not only in the future, but now, we must ask the hard question  
about whether what we’re about—what we’re selling, if you will—  
truly satisfies people’s real needs.

Once upon a time, Unitarianism was filled with people  
who came to us as refugees from mostly Christian denominations.  
They came seeking religious freedom.

The founding purpose of my congregation—and I imagine each of yours—  
was to be a beacon of religious freedom for the city in which we live.

Our first charter in 1845 declared as our guiding principle  
freedom of conscience in all matters of belief.

That set our congregation apart at the time.

As Mark said last night, the assertion of that freedom  
even put early Unitarians in Toronto  
at risk of discrimination and persecution.

Eventually, though, Unitarians were, of course, recognised by the government and granted full legal status.

Over time, the Christian consensus in Canada itself began to liberalize.

And, eventually, we weren't thought to be quite the heretics we had once been.

By the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though, Unitarianism began to move beyond simply seeking freedom from religious creeds to, in many ways, seeking freedom from religion itself.

An urge I'm not sure we've yet gotten over.

For several decades our congregations were defined by an edgy and unapologetic Humanism that sought to throw off and throw out all the trappings of religion.

Many people in my congregation still fondly remember my predecessor John Morgan preaching on Easter mornings in the 1960's about Communism and Chairman Mao rather than the more traditional themes dictated by the day or by custom.

It was an iconoclastic era—and it needed to be. The restrictive forms of religion were found wanting, and it was thought their demise was right around the corner.

In 1966, the cover of *Time Magazine* famously declared that God was dead.

A few months before, the theologian Harvey Cox wrote:

The rise of urban civilization and the collapse of traditional religion are the two main hallmarks of our era. . . . It will do no good to cling to our religious and metaphysical versions of Christianity in the hope that one day religion or metaphysics will once again be back. They are disappearing forever . . .

He said that in 1965, at the beginning of his career as a professor at Harvard Divinity School.

Fifty years later, still teaching there,  
he was one of my professors, but his message had changed.

He was and is the first to admit that he got it wrong—and spectacularly so.

Obviously enough, religion, in general,  
and Christianity, in particular, didn't disappear.

But the landscape looks radically different today  
than it did in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Back then, there was the expectation—the hope among religious liberals—  
that reason would win out, that progressive religion would flourish  
and the more fundamentalist forms of religion  
would wither away into irrelevance as human knowledge advanced.

It was thought that a good argument would surely carry the day.

And, yet, that's not how it played out.  
In many ways, just the opposite happened.

Liberal religion never really got the traction that had been hoped for.

Instead, fundamentalist movements gained strength  
in response to the threats of the modern world  
and the liberalizing factions within their own religious traditions.

Every action has a reaction, and so it has been with modernity and liberalism.

Each progressive advance has tended to provoke  
a digging in of the heels in response.

As any newspaper will easily reveal, globally,  
this has brought about a growing polarization  
between more secular societies on one end  
and pockets, some of them quite large,  
of religious fundamentalism on the other.

While, thankfully, this religious polarization

is not typically so pronounced in Canada,  
there are changes underway here, too.

Three years ago at the ACM in Victoria, Professor Paul Bramadat described how Canadian society was moving out of the pact that had been tacitly made as part of Trudeau-era Multiculturalism: the idea that all were free to practice their religion, whatever it might be, but that religion was expected to remain in the private sphere, a matter of personal, and, again, private, concern.

As he pointed out, that pact is obviously no longer holding—as evidenced in the debates we’ve had in recent years, such as whether to uphold Sharia Law in Ontario or the right of women in Quebec to wear the niqab, whether biblically-based arguments against homosexuality constitute hate speech in Alberta, or whether polygamy is a legitimate form of religious expression amongst a Mormon splinter group in B.C.

Religious differences are becoming a growing source of tension in our common life.

Only time will tell whether Canada will successfully navigate these choppy waters, as we sort through the implications of our religious diversity.

The recent National Household Survey points to the shifting numbers that you’d expect to see with Canada’s enviable mix of a relatively open immigration policy and our increasing secularization.

There is, not surprisingly, a steady rise here of what we once would have called “world religions.”

Those “world religions” are now quite at home in countries around the planet, including here.

The headlines from last week’s Household survey really confirm ongoing trends.

There is a steady decline in the more liberal Christian traditions in Canada. The United Church is hemorrhaging members.

To read their national magazine, *The Observer*,  
is to hear a constant litany of concern for their diminishing prospects.

The Anglicans are even worse off.

If they continue to lose members at their current pace,  
the Anglican Church of Canada will be completely gone in a decade.

That won't happen, of course.  
There will likely always be some existing remnant.

But it is fair to say that the uncertain future that they face  
will be nothing like the storied past they have enjoyed.

What's gotten a great deal of attention in various surveys lately  
is the dramatic rise of people who report having no religion—  
the “Nones” as they are often called.

This is the fastest growing group in recent surveys.  
Most of these people don't consider themselves to be atheists,  
but they are highly skeptical of religion.

Most tend to be younger—belonging to Generation X and Generation Y.

Reginald Bibby, the Canadian religious sociologist,  
says it's still too early to tell, but that it seems  
this could be a transitional label for many younger people.

David Foot, the professor of economics at the University of Toronto,  
who gave the keynote address at our ACM in Toronto two years ago,  
made a similar argument.

He said that finding and committing to religion  
tends to be a mid-to-later life activity—  
when existential questions bubble up  
and our mortality starts to come into clearer focus.

I understand what he's saying.

We can see evidence of it being true to some degree for Baby Boomers.

But, I'm not yet completely convinced that the generations my age and younger (I'm 43) are going to suddenly take up a religious quest that will lead them into the old religious forms that served their parents and grandparents.

At least not in large numbers.

As comforting as it would be to trust that these generations will follow the patterns of their parents, I'm just not sure it will pan out.

For starters, huge numbers in this age cohort weren't raised within a religion in the first place.

Unlike their Boomer parents, if they find themselves facing existential questions once they have children or hit mid-life crises, they won't be so much returning to religion as discovering it for the first time—if they're even so inclined.

What most of them are and will be looking for isn't religious freedom. Most of them have had plenty of that.

Which may have something to do with why the ones who have turned to religion have tended to go the more conservative route.

Indeed, the younger new people who are arriving in *our* congregations are coming in search of some structure, some boundaries, some evidence of clear commitments—signs that we actually walk our talk.

They usually aren't coming to us as refugees from some restrictive faith tradition, though a few still do.

More often, they are arriving without any real knowledge at all of how a religious community works.

For a while I was finding this trend incredibly frustrating until Angela Klassen, our Director of Lifespan Religious Education, hit upon a mantra that has served our staff well:

“If they don’t have it, we have to bring it.”

We can no longer assume people arrive with the knowledge of how a congregation functions.

If it is to be passed on, our tradition has to be spelled out to those who didn’t inherit it from the beginning of their lives.

Expectations need to be clear and up-front. Without being condescending, we must fill in the gaps, explaining what the norms of our communities are.

And in all of this, we must recognise that these generations arrive in our congregations with some well-defined norms of their own.

They are used to being highly collaborative and interactive, expecting to have a voice and to be taken seriously.

They are looking for authenticity and can sense when it’s missing.

We must also remember that younger Canadians, by and large, assume diversity.

It is the very world that most of them have played, learned, and worked in. They, frankly, find it weird to discover it missing from our congregations.

Though they like to get involved, they also tend to resist joining organizations.

In years to come, this will eventually likely present a huge challenge to our understanding of congregational polity, which sees our religious democracy based on the commitment of an individual’s membership within a particular community.

If they’re not signing on as members of congregations, we may need to start thinking of our governance in very different ways.

Not unrelated to this, the younger generations also have different ideas about money.

Generation Y and the generation that follows after them has come of age in an era when they are accustomed to downloading much of what they want for free.

When they are asked to contribute to things, they usually think in terms of user fees—of what the specific cost is for the thing they're getting.

It's not always easy to quantify such value in a congregation.  
And when we do, the price tag will likely cause them severe sticker shock.

I recently read that it typically takes the contributions of 15 Gen Y people to make up for the loss of one typical annual contribution by a Baby Boomer.

There are reasons for this, of course.  
Gen Y is not finding access to the jobs or the salaries their parents did as young adults.

That might change over time, but recent reports are projecting that the earning potential of Generation Y is going to be far less than that of their parents and grandparents.

As a cohort, they have amassed significantly less wealth than their parents' generations had by the same age.

One of the obvious ramifications of this—assuming that Gen X and Y do someday make up our congregations—is that they will likely not have the same sort of financial resources to sustain a congregation in the ways that we do now.

Put another way, we're arguably facing the end of the generation that will likely have the money to endow institutions and make substantial financial commitments to their ongoing health.

Last week, members of our Building Task Force and I sat down with our Twerty-Somethings, the folks in their 20s and 30s in our congregation.

We discussed their dreams and their fears for Toronto First.

One important concern was debt—not only their own, but the thought that in building a new building we might incur debt that they would be burdened to somehow repay.

In whatever we decide to do about our building,  
we must listen to that concern.

Finally, this is also, of course, the generation that are considered “natives”  
to the technologies that the rest of us have had to try to figure out  
as they’ve come along.

Social media isn’t something to be adopted for them.  
It’s simply the way they stay in touch—and always have—with the world.

When I first started working in a church twenty-two years ago,  
I remember the delivery and installation of this new-fangled thing called a fax machine.

It was amazing to be able to send a copy of a letter or report to someone  
on the other side of the planet, without having to mail a physical copy.

Then came email. How many of you remember church life before email?  
Am I the only one that longs for the return of those halcyon days?

At the same time, think about how much gets accomplished  
through the use of email in our congregations.

The funny thing is that younger generations see email  
as something that older people use. . . And, well, they are right.

It seems, though, that being connected through technology isn’t wholly sufficient  
in satisfying the need for human connection.

That is a place where religious community  
can potentially serve a real human need with this generation in the future.

And, yet, a typical Sunday morning service may not fit the bill.

In an on-demand era—in which we’ve grown accustomed  
to watching television programmes when we want to see them—  
the notion of a single big event—  
scheduled mid-morning on a weekend, no less—  
is probably a losing proposition long-term.

As I said earlier, it is hard to predict  
what future generations of Unitarians are going to need.  
I'm fairly certain they won't need pipe organs.

What they will need, I suspect, is a meeting place, a hub, a geographic centre,  
a meeting house where they are renewed in community  
and inspired and equipped to meet the needs of a hurting world.

I began by sharing with you the dilemma  
we are facing around the future of our building in Toronto.

As is hopefully now clear, the decision is complicated  
by factors beyond our own immediate needs.

In concrete terms, quite literally,  
the neighbourhood around us is changing.

Our society is aging, and our needs evolving.

The religious landscape beyond our walls,  
is radically transforming with each passing year.

In too many places around the globe,  
religion is ripping at the fabric of life itself, dividing people  
rather than drawing them together in common purpose.

The challenges facing the human race  
and life on this planet we call home  
are arguably the most serious the world has ever known.

In light of all of this, I find myself wondering what would it mean  
for us to be not merely relevant,  
but a truly transformative religion for the times in which we live?

I will tell you that that is the question that flickers in my heart at all times.

Because it is a question of burning importance.

We live in a time of increasing alienation and fragmentation.

The enduring notion of community is being lost.

Material consumption and mass marketing  
define our existence in ways almost too powerful to resist.

Our participation in genuine democracy is eroding,  
just as it seems we need it most.

The extreme concentrations of wealth and poverty  
have left our social contract with each other in tatters  
and our covenant with the planet all but broken.

But as devastating as this long list of woes is,  
I still have hope and I still have faith that we can build a better world.

For we share a religion that is not only relevant,  
but one that can change this world for good.

I believe this faith—that teaches us to honour life  
and to respect difference, to seek justice and to work for peace—  
is the religion the world needs for just such a time as this.

Every problem I mentioned a moment ago has, at its root,  
a spiritual crisis.

And, every problem, I believe has a spiritual cure  
that I think our theology speaks to in powerful ways.

The healing of this world isn't entirely up to us,  
but I believe we can play an outsized role,  
if we were to come alive and model a different way of being.

This planet and her people are in desperate need  
of courageous souls who have come alive  
with a burning commitment to create a better and sustainable world—  
a world of justice and peace, held together in love.

If we are to be a vital part of that—

to be truly relevant to the times in which we live—  
we will have to summon the courage to embrace  
much bolder ways of being.

And, therein is my hope.

The demands of the future are daunting by any measure.

And, yet, I can't imagine feeling any better  
about the hand that is ours to play,  
for we are blessed with great gifts at a critical juncture in time.

One of our most tremendous strengths is a capacity for change.  
When other religions were threatened by the theory of evolution,  
we took its truth to heart.

Friends, the need for evolution is upon us.

So I ask: what would you do—in my position, in our position—  
or in whatever position you hold:  
as a congregational president facing increasingly tight budgets,  
as a minister wondering what to do about flat-lining numbers,  
as someone who's just signed on to help your congregation succeed in some big way,  
as a younger person who is wondering whether and how your generation  
will ever find an enduring foothold in this faith,  
or as a person who knows yourself to be a Unitarian in your bones,  
but finds our traditional structures of congregational life don't meet your needs?

Whoever you are,  
from the perch that you hold and the perspective it gives you,  
what would you do in charting a course through these challenges,  
what would you do in building for the future?

Or, better put, not what *would you do*, but what *will you do*?

My deep hope is that we will work together to meet the future with courage,  
that our tradition will not merely survive, but thrive in times yet to come.

Thank you.