



CANADIAN  
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**THE TRANSIENT AND PERMANENT IN  
CANADIAN UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM**  
Reverend Jeff Brown and Reverend Carly Gaylor  
Confluence Lecture 2014

**THE CHURCH OF OUR IMAGINATION**

Carly: We love our congregations and we are called out of them.

Jeff: We imagine church without buildings.

Carly: We imagine church through social enterprise — a café, bike shop, community centre.

Jeff: We imagine church in houses – meeting as small groups as part of a larger body.

Carly: We imagine church online — maintaining connectedness over distance when we can't be together in person.

Jeff: We imagine church on the street — building relationships, hearing stories, becoming friends.

Carly: We imagine church embedded in neighbourhoods — with deep roots and porous walls.

Jeff: And we imagine our present churches, vibrant and sustainable, embedded in a dynamic web of symbiotic relationship.

Carly: We are called to start building this web.

Carly: It started at last year's ACM when Sean Neil-Barron, Curtis Murphy, and I were talking about our hopes for Canadian UUism and our ministries. Inspired by Rev. Shawn Newton's Confluence Lecture and knowing in our hearts that the ministry to which we feel most called looks different than traditional congregational ministry, we joked about writing a tract to pin to the church door, like Luther, or at least to pin to Facebook. And I said, "let's do it — I'll get my computer," and so we stood on a balcony and wrote "The Church of Our Imagination."

And we shared it with others, and Rod Solano-Quesnel added a tweak and Liz James said don't ever get together and do something like that without me again! It was then shared



with the CUC Board and Staff and Ministers of Canada at our meeting last Victoria Day, and subsequently with some of our congregations. Several other people “signed on.” And we realized that we weren’t the only ones yearning for a different way of doing and being church.

Jeff: On May 19th 173 years ago Theodore Parker preached a sermon, “The Transient and Permanent in Christianity” at the ordination of Charles Shackford. It became an all-time hit for North American Unitarians, though not until sometime later.

In it he expressed the frustrations of a generation for whom Unitarianism had grown flat and lacking meaning. He wasn’t far off the mark. Within a decade he was preaching to throngs in the thousands — the largest regular gathering of Unitarians that we have witnessed, then or now.

Carly’s cohort’s disillusion with the current state of Canadian Unitarian Universalism reflects a similar call to shake up our complacency: to “do church” differently. (And, yes, we are all too complacent in our sense that we’re doing religion better than the other fellows on the block.)

Last year Shawn asked us: “Stay or Go.” Not specifically about a building — though that was there. Instead, he challenged us to consider whether we were willing to question how we gather: how we congregate.

## OUR STORIES

Carly: Today Jeff and I would like to resurrect the image of the vibrant ecosystem of interconnected Unitarian Universalist communities across Canada. Like any healthy ecosystem, diversity is important: without diverse species, we are vulnerable to change . . . changes in culture, changes in generations, changes in economic well-being. The ideal of the one-size fits all, one space fits all congregation no longer exists, if it ever did. Not every congregation has to be a program-sized or larger church. And yet sometimes it seems like we are still stuck in how we define success and health of a congregation. We don’t need a whole ecosystem of oak trees or deer, snails or dandelions (which happen to be my favourites), and sometimes we lose sight of the gifts that come and could come in a variety of sizes and forms in our communities. Whatever form they take, healthy and diverse UU communities call us to relationship with ourselves, one another, the world, and the divine mystery.



While our current ecosystem contains some diversity, I hope that our Canadian UU story will be one of passion and courage to further diversify — creating new ways of gathering and meaning making together.

The first time I stood in a Unitarian Universalist pulpit, I was 13. I was giving a testimony about why I come to church each Sunday. Back then there wasn't a coming of age program, but standing in the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto pulpit was part of my coming of age. My family travelled from out of town, and I concluded that "it's worth the drive FROM Acton." Though I didn't particularly like public speaking, somehow this testimony from the pulpit felt different. It wasn't public speaking, it was sharing in a community where I loved and was loved. I felt safe to speak my truth. Afterwards I shook hands and received hugs and felt accepted.

And when my parents were in a serious car accident when I was 18, our congregation wrapped around us, in words and food and care. What a gift, one I find over and over in our communities, and part of what led me to dedicate my life to UU ministry. I have stood in many pulpits since, and though as a minister I will never again receive the ubiquitous support for everything I say from here (it IS Unitarian Universalism, after all), I continue to appreciate the spirit of inclusion and acceptance I find in my spiritual home.

As my journey continued to unfold, I experienced other communities that widened my understanding of meaningful ways of gathering as well as inclusivity and welcome. One was Student Open Circles, where I co-facilitated a weekly spiritual practice group, as well as participating in a weekly volunteering group that integrated reflection at the end of each day of volunteering. As much as I had always loved attending Sunday worship, it was that my spiritual life took on new meaning and depth. I found that meeting weekly for spiritual grounding with a group of people who were truly diverse – Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, and some with no formal religious affiliation or experience – was different than attending weekly worship services. I went from a relatively slow incline in my spiritual journey to growing leaps and bounds in my ability to integrate spiritual practices into my daily life, and in my understanding of my relationship with myself, others, and the Divine. Sometimes it felt strange that it was not in UU community that I found this, but I was nonetheless grateful.

And the same group led me to Welcome Inn Community Centre, where I started as a volunteer, then worked as staff, and then returned after seminary to my current role as Executive Director. When I first worked at Welcome Inn, I was humbled each day by the beauty of people's stories... stories of hardship and resilience, survival and hope amidst challenging life situations and poverty. I also attended the then open Welcome Inn Church and found home and inspiration there in the raw authenticity, enthusiastically off-key



singing, shaking of homemade beer bottle cap tambourines, smoke breaks, and interruptions of “oh, yeah — something like that happened to me once.”

Yet it began a period of spiritual dissonance for me. For the first time in my life, I started to feel dissatisfied with UU worship. And this is coming from the person who as a teenager regularly chose worship over youth group. But it felt like something was missing. I was learning of my own needs that I had been unaware of — perhaps I was growing new needs. Needs for relationships with people experiencing hardship and poverty, and not just awareness, fundraising, or even political action. Needs for raw and authentic worship where sharing of our lives figured prominently, and where genuine support was given and received. UU worship suddenly felt less intimate, connected, or grounded in social justice. It was disconcerting and painful to feel this new angst in worship when I had always found it a place of meaning and connection. And there were times that I felt frustrated and angry — angry that this shift had taken something special from me. And there were also barriers at Welcome Inn — while I loved it there, the Christian theology practiced there was not my own, and I continued to self-identify as UU.

While in the midst of this spiritual crisis of sorts, I applied to seminary. I decided to combine my master of divinity with a master of social work degree due to my growing sense of call to UU community and working directly with people experiencing injustice and poverty. And in my seminary application, I described my call. Basically, I wanted to someday create my own Welcome Inn-like, UU ministry. A blend of congregational and community ministry, working directly with people from all walks of life to build bridges and relationships. Aboriginal activist Lilla Watson said: “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is tied up in mine, then let us work together.” I had found Welcome Inn so transformative in my own life, and dedicated my life to creating and sustaining transformative UU community. I am yearning for and committed to finding ways to work together for our mutual liberation, finding moments, however fleeting, of healing, love, and justice in the midst of our hurting world.

I haven’t regained the pure magic I had in UU worship when I was younger. But I have learned to live into the dissonance as a spiritual practice, including gratitude for the moments of connection and deep meaning when they come. And they often do. And when the magic isn’t there, I light my fire of commitment to continue to learn how to find and create those moments... it’s an ongoing process.

Jeff: As a third generation Universalist and a fifth (or maybe sixth) generation Unitarian, my life has revolved around congregations. It wasn’t until high school though that I began to discover a real craving for religious community.



I wasn't alone. I had other age mates who were questioning assumptions, seeking meaning, and, yes, pushing social norms with a righteous indignation that only teens can muster. In those days, the early 1960s, a logical outlet was a local LRY (Liberal Religious Youth) group. Since the congregation didn't have one, we created it. We discovered in those first years the critical importance a community where we could assume trust and where we learned how to challenge one another in supportive ways. Whether in our small worship circles or our informal yet life-altering conversations around the fireplace in our meeting room, we discovered a profound caring and an intimacy that we hadn't found elsewhere.

The other experience I'll mention is the time that I've spent with Friends — of the Quaker persuasion. I first joined a Quaker meeting about 1970, when I was studying for the Unitarian Universalist ministry. Since then, off and on, I've participated in Quaker meetings where I've lived. Why? Two reasons.

First, and similar to us, theirs is an activist faith. Their values push them to be involved in the world, hoping to bend the arc human justice and, more recently, planetary sustainability. I can blame my childhood religious education. The *New Beacon Series*, produced by Unitarians and Universalists in the 1940s and 1950s, told stories of people who struggled for a more compassionate world. The spirit of both traditions embraced change. Second, and this is my introverted self speaking, Quaker worship gave me the opportunity to be alone in communal worship. My thoughts meandered, sometimes brought back to the assembly by the spoken musings of another person. Quaker worship, like my time wandering through forests or greeting the dawn on a mountain summit, has offered me moments to engage the holy — alone.

## **UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST VALUES – THE “PERMANENT”**

Carly: Because of my experiences at Welcome Inn, I spent much of my time in seminary and social work exploring what our UU faith may have to offer and learn from people experiencing hardship and marginalization. I yearned for a sense of comfort and purpose in hard times in a religion that is sometimes accused of being a “fair-weather faith”. After much contemplation, I concluded that we do indeed have something to offer.

Jeff: Our Principles and Sources, those phrases that so many Unitarian Universalists hold dear do not express eternal truths. I remember the two General Assemblies in 1984 and 1985 where we hammered them out and voted on them. Our “affirmations” usually last for a generation or two, hardly an eon or even an era.



Even realizing that our expressions of faith are transitory, we are continually compelled to identify what endures for our movement: the “permanent” of Theodore Parker. And we have often “crucified” the souls who have undertaken this exercise. That’s a good enough reason to take a stab at it today.

### ***We Are Called to Respect Each Person’s Gifts***

Jeff: One ongoing strand in our movement’s history is the place of personhood in our pantheon of cherished values. For better and worse, we encourage individuals to shape their lives and their thoughts to their best ability. We raise up this capacity and this responsibility for shaping ourselves, recognizing its pitfalls — the real possibility for hubris and mistakes (tiny or titanic). Still, this embrace of an individual’s capacity for wisdom (or folly) does appear a ongoing hallmark of our faith.

### ***We Are Called to Inclusion***

Carly: Like the acceptance I found as a youth in the Toronto First community, we continually challenge ourselves and each other to create space for one another, to accept and embrace difference, and to be loved just as we are. As Meg referenced last night, this is an incredibly powerful thing, especially in our culture of isolation and loneliness. We are all worthy of being here, today, together just by showing up.

### ***We Are Called to Curiosity***

Jeff: From our earliest days, a spirit of enquiry has led us to explore our world in new and creative ways. We have pushed traditional boundaries because our minds and hearts would not cease wondering about the limitations of contemporary truths. We encourage our children to ask questions about everything. Our ancestors challenged established dogmas which seemed to stifle experience and common sense. This sensibility has usually flourished within our movement, finally pushing us beyond the limits of the Christianity from which we sprang.

### ***We Are Called to Lived Experience***

Carly: We also honour lived experience. Our stories are our stories, and rather than fit them into a larger religious narrative, we value them for what they are — both completely unique and yet threaded together with themes as old as humanity. And so at our best, we honour a story of hardship for its own sake, just as we honour a story of joy.

### ***We Are Called to Present-Mindedness***



Jeff: We focus on the “here and now.” For me, the significance of being present in the moment arises from my own North American, suburban, vanilla-pudding upbringing. In that setting, religion cared only about the farthest away future imaginable. My religious education offered an important counter-narrative. *From Long Ago and Many Lands* (Grade 3), with its multicultural stories, introduced me to what people around the world valued most. *How Miracles Abound* (Grade 5) expanded my vision of an amazingly complex, beautifully intricate creation. *Beginnings: Earth, Sky, Life, Death* (Grade 6) explored themes that none of my friends questioned. *The Church Across the Street* (Grade 8) acquainted me, at least slightly, with the diversity of belief systems practised by human beings. (Admittedly, the spectrum was pretty narrow, but we’re talking small town 1950s.) Each stage of this curriculum expanded my enchantment with the world in which I lived.

### ***We Are Called to “Change the World”***

Carly: Throughout our history, we have taken a stand on issues of social justice that have helped, in small and larger ways, to change the world. Some of these stands have been for women’s rights, including the right to vote and the ordination of women, civil rights and the anti-slavery movement, rights and inclusion of people of diverse sexual and gender identities, and our current forays into reconciliation with Canada’s Indigenous people and the Right to Die movement.

### ***We Are Called to Reflect Our Place in the Whole***

Jeff: Paralleling a here-and-now approach, and while less distinctly articulated, is the reality that our own lives are wholly embedded in the life of the universe. The importance of sense experience and intuition anchors our faith in a fundamentally all-encompassing, nature-based universe.

### ***We Are Called to Uphold the Sacredness of All Life***

Carly: We are deeply interconnected, and we honour all life as sacred. From the towering shade of a thousand year old redwood tree, to the newborn baby taking his first breath, to the spider weaving her web as it glistens in the sunlight, all life is sacred. You are sacred. I am sacred. We are sacred, and we are also intimately connected. The fabric of our lives weaves us together: the water we drink returns to the ocean, provides habitat for the amoeba and great whale, only to evaporate and fall again as rain, watering the crops we sow and the reservoirs from which we drink. The food we consume comes from other living things: the plants and animals of our planet. They give their lives for us, and sometimes we for them. Astronomer Harlow Shapley purposes a thought experiment: when we breathe in,



we breathe in argon as well as oxygen and hydrogen. We breathe out that same argon. What does this mean? I invite you to take a deep breathe in with me: at this moment, we each hold in our lungs argon molecules breathed out by one another. We also hold in our lungs molecules that passed through the bodies of our parents and grandparents, Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. We hold in our lungs molecules breathed in and out by the Buddha and Jesus. They are part of us, and we part of them. Our lives are sacred in their interconnection. We need only breathe our next breath to hold that connection again.

#### DIVERSITY – BEING FED IN DIFFERENT WAYS

Jeff: We have much to offer. Still, it appears that there are always more people who might stand with us than are here. We proclaim that broad swaths of humanity are “Unitarian Universalists without knowing it,” but we often don’t truly honour how different people are when we make the statement.

The 2011 StatsCan numbers should shatter some of our illusions. We often look with bewilderment at the army of “Nones” in these reports — those people, not in black habits but who declare no religious affiliation. They now include nearly one quarter of all Canadians (23.9%). In the decade from 2001 to 2011, their numbers have multiplied by more than 25 (26.7) percent. Our critics have described us as the departure gate out of traditional religious practice. If we indeed served that function, then we’ve hung around the wrong terminal as, in the past ten years, more than 3,000,000 (3,054,280) Canadian souls have left their previous religious havens and haven’t found our departure lounge. Something about us hasn’t attracted these groups of travelers who we imagine should find us a welcome respite.

Carly: Some of our folks at Welcome Inn where I work are drawn to the same core principles, which when expressed in Welcome Inn terms, sound like, and I quote “you’re accepted even if you have seven heads.” And yet many of them, longing for belonging, wouldn’t necessarily feel comfortable walking through the front doors of most of our congregations – or this conference. And many of our own UU young adults feel disconnected and are not participating in our congregations regularly either.

Jeff: For many folk, faith as practised in our congregational settings satisfies. We like the ways in which we get together. We like the ways we share our work, we share our wisdom, we join our voices in song, we act as one body, we unburden our sorrows and express our joys, we explore our experiences, we teach our children and our grandchildren, we celebrate our lives, we give thanks.

But, obviously, for a lot of people something isn’t working. (Duh.)



Carly: Nearly a century ago, Rev. Lewis B. Fisher, the dean of the Universalist seminary at St. Lawrence University, said, “Universalists are often asked to tell where they stand. The only true answer . . . is that we do not stand at all, we move.” And it is just as true for Unitarian Universalism today: our living tradition continues to grow and change.

We try to be open to new ideas and theologies. We strive to be communities where people are accepted and welcomed as they are. We value learning and dialogue (especially dialogue). And yet **how** we do things sometimes changes more slowly. We are not unlike other religious traditions in that there certain things we hold on to. Hymns, readings, and a sermon in worship. Sunday mornings. Committees. A few more committees for good measure. Potlucks. All good things, but are there other ways that some people might engage? What if you aren’t, for example, a Sunday morning worship person or a committee person, but are deeply yearning for UU community? What do our young people tell us about the difficult transition from the youth community to our adult centric congregations? We know from the tears and from losing many of our young people that for many this is a loss without a corresponding gain.

Jeff: What might we look like if we were equally open to **how** we do things as we strive to be more open to a range of ideas, practices, and people?

The way we do it now doesn’t seem to be working. Often we try to broaden our programming, to offer more when someone suggests something new. But our congregations, small by most standards and spread out over a vast Canadian geography, may already have more diversity of perspective, belief, action, and vision than any one community can effectively accommodate. Look at our smorgasbord of activities: sacred dancing, drumming circles, discussion groups and even our variety in language: Spirit of Life, the Universe, God. We expand because we value inclusivity and because we hope to grow. We also do it recognizing that if our community doesn’t work for someone, in most Canadian cities, there isn’t another Unitarian Universalist congregation down the street. Yet being everything to everyone is an impossible task, and when the potpourri found in one community becomes too complex, the front door becomes a revolving door. We lose our young adults, our humanists, our mystics, our activists, our traditionalists.

Carly: If we aren’t successful in serving the diversity we currently have, how can we hope to further diversify?

What if we gave ourselves permission not to try to be everything to everyone in any one UU community? To allow ourselves to focus our efforts and activities, even if it means that we won’t have (or at least attempt) universal appeal? To create new “doors” or



communities even as we allow our current communities to become more specialized. So in one geographical area there might be a congregation that invests in incredible music, a community that meets Sunday evenings for alternative worship, and a congregation that meets for weekly World Cafe discussions. In a way we see that in our larger cities, for example in Toronto where Neighbourhood, Toronto First, Don Heights, and Northwest offer distinct experiences that appeal to different people. In the 16th century, Unitarian Francis David said: “We need not think alike to love alike.” Today, perhaps we need not gather alike to love alike.

## BARRIERS AND RESOURCES

Carly: So what is holding us back from gathering in new and different ways?

### ***Worrying About the Money***

Jeff: Learned people have spent volumes bemoaning and berating religious folk, including Unitarian Universalists, for their deep-seated perceptions of poverty. Our own Jane Bramadat and Wayne Walder focused a whole Confluence talk unpacking our anxieties around money and its antidote: generosity. Our congregations and our national bodies struggle to resource themselves adequately. We — some of us anyway — complain that we don’t take our faith seriously enough when it comes to support. Recent statistics would seem to show that we contribute at about the same level as other Western faith groups: about 2½ (2.3) percent of our income. Though we regularly carp about our CUC’s “fair share” assessments, we’re not out of line with other “denominations.”

In our current incarnation, we accomplish these activities at a cost of about \$1,800 (\$1771) a member. I won’t flog this issue further except to name it as one of our major barriers.

### ***Trusting One Another***

Carly: We also have trust issues. The shadow side of our individualism is a basic lack of trust in one another. Sometimes I wonder if our stacks of congregational committees are not just a reflection of the value we place on democracy, but rather our reluctance to trust one another’s decisions. Research shows that no matter the size of a group (though you do need enough), there are usually only 60 unique ideas in response to a brainstorming question. But when we add slight variations in wording, the options change from concrete to infinite. I’m a big process person, and like to think and talk things through. But sometimes it feels like we’re hiding behind and within process, and discussion, and even the democratic process as a safer, more comfortable place than acting and taking risks together. It’s one



thing to differ in our ideas and in discussion, and quite another to live with the results of our collective action.

And maybe we don't trust ourselves, individually or collectively, to know the way forward.

How many times do we put out a new statement and then have to go back to several months of consultation in our congregations and within the CUC? Even the CUC board, when proposing a new vision and mission statement for consideration this February, found that rather than going forward, we put up a stop sign so we can all have a say.

Stop signs that keep us from saying the wrong thing, using the wrong words, failing. Stop signs that keep us from taking risks and trusting ourselves and one another, come what may.

### ***Fearing Change***

Jeff: We fear change. Mark Morrison-Reed, in a talk to a recent Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly, challenged North American Unitarian Universalists, to change. Paradoxically, he began by daring us to admit that we already have a strong identity. We're allergic to accept being defined though. We have a culture, yet our hubris blinds us to this reality. When I was growing up, we were the faith of the future; we would once again dominate the religious landscape, as we had in our past glory days — please forgive this very US-centric historical perspective. We riffed on Thomas Jefferson's unfulfilled projection that Unitarians "will ere long be the religion of the majority from North to South, I have no doubt." The famous Unitarian Laymen's League advertising initiatives asked our neighbours: "Are You a Unitarian Without Knowing It?" and inferred that all thinking people would eventually see our "light."

Once we admit who we are though, then we're faced with a more daunting dilemma. Do we really want to be different than we are? Aren't we comfortable as we are, with what we do — often well — too comfortable to either seek transformation or to really engage ourselves more deeply and fully?

*So we understand the need for change and may be open to it if it doesn't go too far. However, at another level we don't want change. But we can't be honest about that. Instead, we say we want diversity but what we'd prefer is a change of appearance rather than substance. We'd settle for looking different rather than being different. But pursue diversity and you invite change, change and you become something different than you were drawn to in the beginning. (Mark Morrison-Reed, "The Perversity of Diversity": 2009)*



So here's our dilemma: we have anxieties that stifle and diminish us, and we also have some essential, enduring, and worthy values. We wallow, mired in our fears: of finances and trust and change. Uncharacteristically we also too frequently hide what we hold most dear: a respect for each person's gifts, a desire for inclusion, a wonderful curiosity that opens us to different ways of seeing and being, beliefs based upon our lived experience, a grounding of our hearts and heads in the "now," a burning impulse to change the world, an understanding that we humans hold no special place in creation, and the celebration of life's sacredness.

Our values centre us in moving forward. They can also help us turn our financial anxieties into generosity, our missing confidence in one another into trust, and our antipathy to change into courage.

They're not all we must have though.

Carly: We also need time, energy, and resources.

We need to assess our current resources and their use to understand the resources we may have for new things. So Jeff and I surveyed our Canadian UU ministers on how much time they spend on one of our most common activities: Sunday services. We figured this uses up a significant amount of our resources. We asked for inclusion of all of the preparation - not just sermons but liaising with service leaders and musicians, preparing orders of services, etc. The results ranged broadly, from 8 hours a week to 26 hours per week. The average was just over 14 hours per week, but everyone agreed that it could depend on the complexity of the services. It should also be noted that most people did not actually include any Sunday morning activities in their calculations... such as actually doing the service. And one minister estimated that all of the human hours in his congregation – including service leaders and story tellers and music directors, etc. — would total closer to 100 hours a week. And many of those hours are paid staff hours. We know our congregations spend most of our financial resources on buildings and staff . . . and it turns out that a good chunk of staff hours are dedicated to making Sundays happen.

Which leads to the question: Have we checked whether this is the preferred and most valuable use of resources? I know some congregations are actively experimenting with different forms within worship. But Sunday mornings, with music, readings, and a message remain the norm. When was the last time we collectively examined how and why we do worship the way we do — given that it's a model that's hundreds of years old, with roots in Christian theology and practice? And if we did survey people, how would we reach people



who don't attend on Sunday because it doesn't work for them? Some people engage in different ways, but many quietly disappear.

I am not suggesting we all change our worship practices. I know for most congregations and many people, it is the heart of our work together as a community and of our spiritual practice. But I wonder if there may be opportunities to try something different, to spend our energy in different ways, and facilitate new and different participants and ways of engaging. And perhaps, in some cases, even relieve ourselves of the pressure to achieve a particular definition of worship success.

We also looked at our financial resources across the country. Contrary to our perception, on average our congregations are doing well in matching revenue to expenses. According to Charity Chimp, we have significant assets: almost \$48 million across the country including all of our congregations and the CUC, as well as Unitarian House in Ottawa. Now, \$26 million of those assets are housed in our physical spaces. But that leaves us with \$22 million in endowments and reserve funds across the country. \$22 million. I don't know about you, but we think that's a pretty significant wealth of resources, especially for people whose story about ourselves is that we are small and don't have enough money.

Most of that \$22 million is invested in funds to secure the future of particular congregations, and we're not suggesting that we spend our money frivolously or without concern for the future. (I have, after all, just spent 3 years counting pennies to make ends meet at Welcome Inn, where miracles happen on a very tight budget.) But I can't help but wonder what we might be able to do with those resources if we thought outside of our comfortable, conventional boxes. What would happen if we asked ourselves if we govern those funds with fear of the future or vision? It seems like the more money we have, the more Scrooge-like we become, keeping it protected and safe. And just what is the future we are preserving?

### **1K Churches**

Carly: There is a movement in the United States called the 1K Churches campaign asking the question: "When it comes to investing in neighborhoods — really investing — where is the church?" They want 1000 churches to be making investments in their communities in the form of loans to help start or expand microbusinesses in their local communities. Loans that might not otherwise be available to the community. Loans that would do social good and build local economic resources.



I love this alternative and generous way of investing financial resources. And I imagine a day when UU congregations and groups in Canada invest in our communities, rather than the stock market.

And I also think this model could be adapted to help us diversify our Canadian UU ecosystem. What if we developed tools to make loans and invest in new UU communities? We could use our endowments and considerable wealth to support UU social enterprises, new starts, and projects. Instead of protecting our own congregations, we could invest in the diversity and sustainability of our Canadian UU movement.

## **TRANSFORMATIONAL COMMUNITY EXAMPLES**

Carly: I was inspired in November to attend the CUC Board visioning retreat as a guest, where several ideas for the future of our movement were brought forward. I appreciated the vision of increasing love and justice in the world. I was hopeful that it seemed natural to expand the conversation from congregations to UU communities — a big step given our congregationalist history and structure! And I was inspired by the consensus in the room that we have something to offer ourselves and the world, something broader and bolder and more inclusive and visionary.

Jeff: If we can muster the generosity (as exemplified by the IK Churches), the trust, and the courage, what might our Canadian Unitarian Universalist universe look like? We can look at examples of existing communities to whet our imagination.

### ***Church of the Larger Fellowship***

Meg's Church of the Larger Fellowship is a digitally connected, essentially full-service congregation: worship, religious education, small groups, affinity interests: a congregation without walls. It's a cross-over — and an early one — melding many of the elements of a traditional church over a world-wide population.

### ***New Hope Church - Hamilton***

Carly: New Hope is a site of First Hamilton Christian Reformed Church that meets in a rented space each Sunday, with refreshments before the service and a casual and family friendly worship style. Some Sundays they go out into their neighbourhood and serve after a brief devotion. And they also have the New Hope Community Bikes, a bike coop and store where people come together to buy and fix bikes, encourage sustainable transportation, and learn new skills.



### ***St. Lydia's Dinner Church***

Jeff: St. Lydia's Dinner Church is just what it sounds like — a church community in New York City that comes together around meals every Sunday and Monday evening. People gather to cook and share a meal together, as well as explore scripture, offer prayers, and sing together. It has ties to both Lutheran and Anglican traditions. They say: "St. Lydia's is an experiment in what the Church might be when the meal we share is the centre of our common life. We're building this together — come and join us!"

### ***Freeway Cafe***

Carly: A coffee house and "third space" — a significant community gathering space outside of home and work — for music, art, warm beverages and baked goods, wireless access and conversation. In the past, Sunday nights included casual worship in the relaxed atmosphere of the coffeehouse.

### ***House Churches***

Jeff: I have friends who participate regularly in house churches. Some are networked with other groups, others have sprung up organically. With no names and no formal ordained leaders, house churches have very informal and egalitarian structures that allow for mutual support and spiritual growth. Larger gatherings of members from multiple groups allow people to participate occasionally in larger worship, learning, and community building. Needed resources are minimal, and members can focus their time and energy on living out their faith.

### ***Hughson Street Baptist Church***

Carly: Hughson Street Baptist Church is organized as a neighbourhood church, and focuses on providing supports and programs in the North End of Hamilton, where I live. They offer weekly soccer all summer for kids, junior and senior high gym drop-ins, coffee and games drop-ins, free clothing give-aways, among other activities. Their members focus their time, energy, and resources to serving the neighbourhood together, and they attract large numbers of young adults who are eager to live out their faith with intentionality in community.

### ***Community Gardens***

Jeff: What about a community built around a garden, with a kitchen and cafe? Here the primary activities are growing, preparing, and sharing food together. Kids are involved with



adults, and job skills training happens. We already have community gardens; imagine those connections expanding over meals, with music and laughter and silence and meditation in the garden and around the table.

## EXISTING ALTERNATIVE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST COMMUNITIES

Carly: How many of you are part of a UU community that in some way breaks out of the traditional congregational mode? I'll ask you to call out (or tweet!) the name of your communities.

I'd like to suggest a few UU communities that come to mind -- please stand if you hear a community that you are part of:

- UU camps in Ontario, BC, or the States
- Youth cons
- Young adult network/community/events
- ACM or regional gatherings
- Midwinter retreat in Ontario
- Nanaimo's shelter
- Unitarian House
- Others?

Thanks. Please be seated.

I'LL ask you to stand again if one or more of these alternative ways of gathering is particularly meaningful in your life — that if it wasn't there anymore, you would experience a sense of loss in your UU community.

I celebrate this diversity in our existing ecosystem.

### ***Spirit Garden***

My UU congregation for the past year has looked a little bit different than most of our congregations. We meet every other week instead of every week. We are a small group of only 8. We come together with a shared interest in creating new and different expressions of UU communities. We are also geographically spread out between Boston and Saskatoon, and so our gatherings have been mostly online, with the exception of two in-person retreats. And so Google + has been our church 'building' (while less than beautiful aesthetics, we appreciated the low overhead costs of this meeting space).

We call ourselves a Spirit Garden. We have talked about how to build a strong, vibrant ecosystem of Canadian UU communities of various expressions. Our conversations



have ranged from financing to mission, prayer to social enterprise, alternative worship to OWL to economic justice initiatives. And we have reminded one another to remain grounded in action, and are working on several ventures: offering a loan to support local initiatives; creating The Frame, a website to curate and frame resources relevant for Canadian UUs; and exploring how to concretely support the launch some of the new initiatives we have in mind. And we are truly UUs in that despite our yearning for less talk and more practice, less theory, and more experience, there has still been a lot of talking.

One of my most memorable moments was our second retreat at my parents' cottage, where our first evening we decided to do a deeper check-in. The first person began with a lot of courage and vulnerability in sharing where she was at. And it started a chain of very deep and vulnerable check-ins as we realized we had all had a difficult few months in a variety of ways. After each check-in, we offered a spiritual practice, which ended up taking the form of laying on of hands and singing together. To be held in this way by people who know and love and care for me was one of the most meaningful spiritual experiences I've had in a long time, infused with a sense of gratitude and connection.

We aren't the only ones with this passion or commitment. We have talked with others who have shared their hopes and dreams... ministry students feeling called to community settings, young adults hoping for a different connection than they're feeling in their local congregation, and people of all ages who have a wide spectrum of ways they want to serve and grow our Canadian UU movement, and heal the world.

## **NEW COMMUNITIES AND RENEWED CONGREGATIONS**

Jeff: We believe we are in the midst of a defining moment for Canadian Unitarian Universalism. As Shawn said: we can stay or we can go. Our decisions and actions will shape the landscape and vitality of our movement for generations to come. We have the means and opportunity. Do we have the passion and commitment, the trust and vulnerability to take new risks?

Carly: And so we ask: Are you committed to making the Church of Our Imagination a reality? We are going to reread our Church of Our Imagination statement, and ask each person here and across the country, and also each of our congregations and communities to thoughtfully consider signing on to help diversify our ecosystem. To sign on does not necessarily mean creating or joining a new community, though it could!, but it does mean action to support different ways of gathering and working together.



Jeff: We hope that signing will not be taken lightly, but instead as an act of commitment and covenant:

Carly: ● A commitment to nurturing our Canadian UU movement in its existing and possible future expressions.

Jeff: ● A commitment to being in relationship with one another within and among congregations and communities, and sharing our experiences, resources, and strengths.

Carly: ● A commitment to humility, that my way isn't the only way, and that we can learn from one another and others who have walked similar paths before us.

Jeff: ● And a commitment to transformation, that we will invite change into our lives, into our communities, our movement — and that we will seek transformation in the world around us.

## THE CHURCH OF OUR IMAGINATION REDUX

Jeff: We love our congregations and we are called out of them.

Carly: We imagine church without buildings.

Jeff: We imagine church through social enterprise — a café, bike shop, community centre.

Carly: We imagine church in houses — meeting as small groups as part of a larger body.

Jeff: We imagine church online — maintaining connectedness over distance when we can't be together in person.

Carly: We imagine church on the street — building relationships, hearing stories, becoming friends.

Jeff: We imagine church imbedded in neighbourhoods — with deep roots and porous walls.

Carly: And we imagine our present churches, vibrant and sustainable, embedded in a dynamic web of symbiotic relationship.

Jeff: We are called to start building this web.

Carly: So may it be.

**To sign onto the Church of Our Imagination: [theframe.ca](http://theframe.ca)**