

## IF YOU COME TO A FORK IN THE ROAD — TAKE IT!

Alternative Paths to Our Future  
(Bob Weekley, December 14, 2008)

Distribute blank paper and pencils. Ask all to look bare tree next to building and write word or phrase that comes to mind. Images, inspirations, emotions it generates. Collect papers.

As members of a congregation, i.e., people who have freely chosen to *congregate*, we share much in common — our spiritual journeys, our interest in exploring the philosophies and mysteries of life, our beliefs and our deeply held values — but still we retain our individuality, our varied creativity, our quirks.

Read some of the responses to the bare tree exercise.

What can we say about our varied responses? I think it says that despite all we have in common we still tend to look at many things differently. Given a physical fact, an old, bare, stub of a tree, we can see it in many ways. The way we look at an ambiguous object can reflect our individual optimism, or pessimism. It demonstrates our diverse and individual relationships with the world around us and with each other — both a blessing and a challenge.

Taken to another level, given the fact that we have organized a fellowship, an existing fact, we can visualize many alternative futures for this fellowship. While we have much in common, we often have different aspirations, hopes, and levels of caring.

What I would like to do today is stimulate thought about the alternatives that now may be facing us as a Fellowship. For the past four years we have had one overriding objective — to acquire and build a “home of our own.” Now that is essentially done. We do still have some perfecting to do: lovingly improving our landscape and finishing and decorating the interior. But we have accomplished the big task. We have a beautiful “home of our own.” How do we take the ongoing momentum we have, the ongoing level of commitment, and maintain it to accomplish the next steps in our growth as a fellowship?

The trees and forest metaphor

Three years ago, long before breaking ground on this project, I spoke to this congregation about how small congregations grow, and I used the metaphor “trees need a forest.” Please indulge me in revisiting this metaphor, because I think it is very apt.

We enjoy the grace and beauty of trees. But trees are transient individuals, and sometimes fragile. We plant a tree and if we stay around long enough, and if it survives its lonely existence, we can watch it grow to its full extent, and then, watch it weaken and die.

Forests, on the other hand, are some of nature’s most enduring and awesome wonders. While individual trees are transient, nature’s forests are eternal.

Forests protect and shelter the individual trees.

Forests retain the water to nurture the individual trees when the drought comes.

Forests stabilize the land and the hillsides to protect the individual trees from being uprooted.

Forests provide a sheltered nursery for the tiny new trees struggling to get their roots.

How do the forests get started? By a few individual trees that take the initiative. It is a great challenge for a new tree to grow to maturity. [Discuss experience in deforested areas.]

And once started, how do the forests grow? When enough trees have begun to stand together they reach a self-sustaining critical mass. So as the individual trees age, or sicken, and die, they merely change their form and become nourishment to sustain the forest with its younger trees. Yes, it is the old that nourish the young in an eternal cycle. But, if the small cluster of trees does not grow to a self-sustaining size, it never becomes a forest and its vulnerable trees will eventually perish.

So we shall see in this metaphor of the trees and the forest a powerful similarity to the organizations built around the interrelations of human beings. I’m seeing specifically how this metaphor relates to the growth – and decline – of religious communities.

A church, spiritual aspects aside, is an organic entity. A church, like the forest, consists of individuals. Like the trees of the forest, the individuals are transient, fragile, subject to weakening or disappearing at any time. But the church, like the forest, has a life of its own. It is more than the sum of its individual constituents. The church that can flourish indefinitely without being bound by the limits of its fragile human constituents. The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock can be a flourishing spiritual beacon and a valued organization of the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula communities one-hundred years from now, long after we are gone.

Also embedded in this “trees and forest” metaphor is one of the immutable universal laws – nothing, *no thing*, ever remains as it is. Not a tree, not a person, and not an organization. Everything is either growing or decaying, rising or falling, expanding or contracting, accelerating or decelerating. Trying to remain in one particular state of affairs is like trying to balance a knife on its edge; the inputs and outputs of any organic system are never exactly equal. Growth and decline are both natural states. But staying the same – with no growth or decline – is an absolutely unnatural state.

What do I see in the bare tree adjacent to our church? I see a lonely, old, dried remnant of a formerly luxuriant and strong tree with its only surviving arm reaching out, reaching heavenward. It is in pathetic condition because it lacked a protecting forest to nourish it and protect it. It was out on its own to face the dangers posed by the redevelopment of the land.

### The fellowship movement

This analogy of the trees and the forest is borne out by the Unitarian fellowship movement that started in the 1940's. At that time Unitarian churches were clustered mostly in the northeast region of the United States. But many people in this post World War II environment across the country were finding that their own religious affiliation was not meeting their need for greater spiritual understanding and for reconciliation with rational thought. In those days there were insufficient Unitarian ministers to meet these growing needs, so the American Unitarian Association in 1945 voted to explore forming lay-led centers in communities where there was no Unitarian church. Thus was launched the Lay Fellowship Plan. A lay-Unitarian, Munroe Husbands, was appointed as the director of the new program.

Munroe Husbands was a modern version of the early Unitarian circuit riders. He would come into a town, book a public site, advertise the meetings, and then meet with local people who were interested in forming a fellowship. He would inspire them and help with the initial organization, and then he would move on.

As many as 600 new congregations were started this way. Initially lay-led, many later grew into full fledged churches with their own ministers. Some became so large and successful that they eventually subdivided into multiple Unitarian churches in the community.

But the record of the fellowship movement is a mixed bag. While some of those fellowships flourished and are great churches today, others remained small, or withered away and died. Why did some live and some die? Think of the trees in their struggle for survival before they become sheltered in a living and lasting forest. Four main reasons are cited for the demise of those fellowships.

The first reason is the most common. Many fellowships *wanted* to stay small. They cherished the intimate and personal nature of their fellowship. So they did not pursue growth. They did not plan for growth. They focused on their own needs and did not devote their work to growth. But the founding pioneers eventually aged or moved away and the fellowship withered away.

Some fellowships developed a creeping apathy. The lay leadership got tired. They forgot their original vision and mission. Lacking growth there was not enough new blood, not enough younger members in the fellowship to energize the congregation.

Another cause of decline was the result of organizational dissension. Some fellowships were dominated by a few people who wanted to maintain control. They had not learned our Unitarian Universalist Principle number five which prescribes the "... use of the democratic process within our congregations..."

Finally, like so many organizations, sometimes personality issues arose. As we know, there are always some people who rock the boat, but if it is a very small boat one or two people not only can rock the boat but can sink it.

Some organizations can recover their balance after the boat has been rocked; others sink.

Happily, there were many success stories among these fellowships. There is one common theme to every single one of the success stories: the fellowships grew. The hardy “trees” that had originally sprouted and banded together gave way to a “forest” that was more lasting than any of the original “trees.”

### Alternative paths

Now to shift metaphors, back to the metaphor of our title, what fork do we take now? What alternative paths are there for us? As a small church we can't go in *all* directions at once, and we know that to flourish we need to maintain our momentum, so what path do we take now? Or do we just sit back and contemplate our success and try to maintain the status quo? If we do that, we lose our momentum and begin to wither away.

One way to approach this question is to ask yourself, what would I like UUFR to be ten years from now? How do I want this Fellowship to be regarded in our community? What activities, programs, and missions would I like to see flourishing in the Fellowship? And in asking this question we must bear in mind that many of the people in this room will not be here in ten years. In the previous ten years many of the stalwart organizers of this Fellowship have *moved away, passed away, or gone astray*.

What are some paths that we could choose to follow that would ensure our growth and the accomplishment of our mission? These are not exclusive of one another — we may want to do them all. But it is a question of priorities. We can only successfully do so many things at once.

Service to the community. Make the UU Fellowship of the Rappahannock known in the community for its help to those who need it. Develop programs that are unique to our Fellowship and also support other existing community programs.

Programs and activities to benefit the community and to make the community aware of own interests. For example we could launch an ESL (English as a Second Language) program for the growing Hispanic population in the area that is struggling to assimilate in American life. We

could launch a lecture series or some kind of forum series where we promote better understanding of complex public affairs issues. I'm sure you could think of other such activities that would engage our own congregation as well as inform the community who we are and what we stand for.

Hire a minister. At first this would be a part-time, perhaps one-quarter time minister who would help us keep our momentum week-to-week, year-to-year. A paid minister, even if part-time, can be a steady force for guiding us to decisions that have proven successful in other churches. A minister can provide the pastoral counseling and pastoral presence that draw many people to a particular church. A minister can lend visibility and credibility in the community to our Fellowship. And, most importantly, a minister can provide the continuity, energy, and expertise that volunteer leaders sometimes lack or lose. Referring back to the Fellowship movement, many withered and died because their volunteer lay leadership just got tired.

A variation on hiring a minister that has been suggested from time to time is to hire a part-time staff person. This does not provide the pastoral functions but can serve to maintain steady continuity that volunteer leaderships sometimes lack or lose.

Finish our building and developing our grounds. Finishing the work we have started is still going to take time, effort, and —as always — money. But a beautiful edifice with multiple uses, memorial gardens, playground, labyrinth, adequate parking, are all features that can support our growth. If we make this a place of beauty people will be attracted to meet here, to spend time here, to attend events, and to schedule activities here.

Build a strong financial future. Having a solid financial foundation makes many of the above paths more feasible. Enhancing our long-term maintenance endowment can ensure that we can handle the inevitable replacement, repair, and maintenance that, without adequate reserve finances can be a great distraction from the other things we would like to do. How should we do this? A regular pledging program? Bequests and other fund development tools? Fund raising activities?

I hope I haven't made you feel overly challenged. We are amazing, and we can do all of these things and more. But like any person, family, or organization, we are most successful when we set goals and priorities.

What do you think some of these goals and priorities should be?

Have people count off into groups.

Discuss some of your own ideas within the group -- not restricted to those I named.

Give us three suggestions from each group that would indicate your priorities.