

“The State of the Church”

**Sermon by The Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, January 13, 2008
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC**

I preached my first “State of the Church” sermon about 25 years ago. I had listened to the “State of the Union” addresses and it occurred to me that a similar sermon might help members of my church know how their minister saw the church. Later I heard of other UU ministers announcing State of the Church sermons. I don’t know I was the first, but they’re common now.

They’re a little risky too. Ministers often guard their views about their churches because candor can be upsetting to members. Ministers can lose their jobs by being too frank. Interim ministers can speak more frankly than permanent ministers. I think Interims serve churches well. You don’t have to agree with the Interim, and you know she’ll be gone soon anyway.

I’m not an Interim but my contract ends on the last day of August. Your search committee hopes to recommend a new permanent minister this year. They have a lot of work to do before they can tell you much. I am not a candidate for the permanent position. The UUA rules for ministerial search require that a UU minister who is either a member or staff member of the congregation must be considered an “inside candidate” who can only be considered by the search committee on an up-or-down basis without them knowing anything about other possible ministerial candidates.

Your search committee felt frustrated by this. I understand. They wanted to know about all possible candidates. To make a long story short, I have withdrawn from candidacy so the committee can look as broadly as they wish for a new minister. That said, it frees me to speak frankly to you about the needs of the congregation and my recommendations.

First and foremost is the problem of the temporary church budget with a \$10,000 deficit for 2008. The CoCo recommended it and the congregation approved it in December. You need to make some big decisions when the issue comes back to the members in a COW in March for consideration.

I’ve gone over the budget with a ruthless eye. I believe it could be reduced by another \$3,000 without severe consequences. However that still would leave a \$7,000 deficit, a huge problem for a small church.

I can think of three ways to solve that problem—ask pledgers to increase their pledges about 15-20% more for the year; live with the deficit by spending reserves earmarked for future maintenance work, or cut back the new minister to one-quarter time. I don’t recommend using your reserves.

You have enough income to end the year in the black if you go without a minister after my contract ends August 31. Members would have to provide Sunday services to replace those that I do—about half of all services most months as well as other ministerial support that you are accustomed to.

Unless the congregation votes in March to go without a minister, I recommend that you do a supplemental canvass asking pledgers to increase their pledges by 15-20%. You haven't asked yourselves for an increase across the board for three years, and the expenses of the church have gone up with inflation. If the supplemental canvass doesn't raise enough, I recommend that you thank pledgers for their increases, go forward with a revised budget, and conduct a "Thirteenth Month" campaign by mail in December, asking everyone on the mailing list to send in a special gift equal to one month's pledge so the church can end the year in the black.

If you want to call a half-time minister to begin next fall, it's imperative that you solve your financial problem this spring. The search committee will be severely handicapped in attracting a good candidate if pledgers have not given enough to pay an acceptable salary. The UUA Director of Settlement says there's a shortage of ministers that will continue for 10 years.

I'm not going to go into detail, but the UUA recommendation for compensation and benefits for a beginning inexperienced minister at a half-time rate is higher than your current budgeted amount. If you can find one.

If you decide to do all services yourselves, you need more people working on your Program Committee—at least a half dozen. Jean-Michel Margot is an able committee chair, but he is hampered by a lack of committee members.

The committee has lost six to eight members in the last year. Jean-Michel recruited them; they came to one or two meetings and then resigned. Jean-Michel and I have been the only ones in attendance at several meetings this year. I think the committee needs to start meeting on Sundays after services, with all members of the church urged to stay and to share ideas for future services. All of you need to get more involved.

This problem runs throughout the church committee structure. Currently we have active Religious Education, Finance, Ministerial Search, Long Range Planning, Welcoming Congregation and Green Sanctuary Committees. We have a choir under the leadership of Jenn Hancock, and volunteers who provide music for services—but no music committee chair and no music planning committee. We have a strong religious education program each Sunday for children in one age group, thanks to the dedicated people working there led by Aimee Tattersall and Shauna Saunders, with support by Barbara Cain, our RE administrator.

Some people do numerous tasks. Several of the most active serve not only the church, but they also lead an affiliated pagan group, Celebrate the Circle, that meets each Sunday evening. More people need share the tasks.

Lots of individuals do jobs for the church all by themselves, but there are not enough people doing things together. We have individuals representing UUCH working with Habitat for Humanity, OCIM (Orange Congregations in Mission) and doing highway litter pick-up but we don't have our own active Membership, Adult Education, Community Action, Hospitality (Coffee hour) or Social Committees or an active Committee on Ministry.

We have excellent Communications for a small church—newsletter and website/email and

Sunday bulletin committees—but each consists of one person. The Coordinating Council is one of the best I've ever worked with. However they're busy doing work that several work groups should be doing.

The church tries to fill vacant roles and committees by asking people to step forward to volunteer. That's not working. During the canvass we asked people to fill out volunteer cards to say where they would like to work. Not one volunteered to be on a committee that he or she wasn't already on.

You are doing many things as a congregation—maybe too many that are of special interest for individuals—but you don't have a vital institutional structure to keep the church strong and growing, bringing new people in and moving well-established people around into new roles. You're in danger of burning people out. Some committees have already burnt out, and need to be reformed for the health of the entire congregation.

I honestly don't know how you do it all. You are accomplishing things over your head, doing more than any other small congregation that I've ever seen. But there's a danger in that. I think you're a wonderful, friendly group that is at the same time hard to get into. The result is that you have been a revolving door for people coming through, and the greatest vitality in the congregation is mostly in people who have been here a long time.

Some of the solution to the problems facing UUCH may come through the work of the Long Term Planning Committee. I think the structure of the congregation needs to be examined and revised. You have 60 members now, and you are trying to function as if you had 90 to 100 members.

Few congregations with 60 members can afford a half-time minister. Perhaps you need a quarter-time administrator with a quarter-time minister—if you can afford it. You would have to raise your pledges to get that.

I think you need to do more things just because they're fun, more social times—parties like the Christmas night party that Aimee opened her home to. You need to bring new people to them. For starters, I recommend that you have a pot luck luncheon following the service once monthly and one evening social event too. Have more fun, whether you like it or not.

You need to share responsibility for Sunday social hours so people will take a three month stretch to provide coffee, tea, juice and munchies, to do one Sunday a month in that period. You could sign on with three or four others and share responsibility for that three month period and then not do it again until the next year. Terry Schneider has done it alone for too long.

I think you need to be more flexible about calling Committee of the Whole meetings when you really need them. I know you take a bath every Saturday night whether you need it or not. COWS aren't like that.

I think you need to consider changing your structure to be like other UU churches of your size.

There's nothing wrong with your structure except that it's the kind that works in churches of 15 to 50 members. When you get above 50 members you enter a new stage and you need a new structure to fit your membership. You don't have to grow big, but your structural clothes need to fit the size that you have grown to.

Your method of decision-making by consensus is great for important issues, but I think you take too many questions to the congregation that an executive board could do better. Everyone really doesn't have to be involved in all the decision-making. It uses up too much energy you need elsewhere.

You need a board to handle business decisions—like the good CoCo that you have now, and then you need to divide up other tasks and give them to work groups. There are some work groups you absolutely need to function: Membership with a half dozen people taking turns on tasks; Hospitality, with a revolving plan so no one gets worn out and you have something to eat and drink each week; Social with people dividing tasks up so you can have fun regularly; Program with a half dozen people who eat and enjoy making plans for Sunday services. These are fundamental necessary work groups.

You need to keep a calendar where everyone can see it, and need to post it on the website as the "Church Calendar," not as "Building Rentals."

Finally, right now I think you need a Committee on Work Groups, three people to serve to support the Moderator and the CoCo in finding people for work groups (some people call them committees) that don't have enough members. The Committee on Work Groups always should ask people direct and individually to serve on one of the work groups that needs people. You all need to say "yes" to them if you want the church to survive. Work groups should be able to revolve members every three months if it's too difficult to get people to take jobs for a whole year. But when you join you should commit for at least three months.

You're a wonderful bunch of people, but you need to make some very big decisions, and changes, or you're going to wear one another out. I'm absolutely amazed at what you have accomplished in your dozen years of life, to have bought this land and built this building, gathered this vital people together, fought for human rights for GLBT people, launched a couple of members towards UU ministry. You've got a lot to be proud of. And a lot of work to do to keep it strong.