

“A Sustainable Future”

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First Church in Boston

In many ways, life is pretty good. The sun finally comes out after a week of rain. The gardens of the city are glorious with spring blossoms. We smile to hear the happy sound of children at play in a park.

And sometimes life does *not* feel particularly good.

Fifty-five years ago where we now sit was in ruins. Just five weeks out from the fire on March 29 that destroyed all but the bell tower and one wall of the church, I imagine that there had been some preliminary clean-up of the ravaged site. Worship services had continued nearby and plans were soon underway to explore options for the future. Today we gather within walls built from the hopes and dreams born of a place of loss and chaos.

The physical structure of First Church stands firm today—ok, I might have heard that there might be a leak or two, some windows that need replacing. That’s ok. We all need some attention after 50 years.

However, after several years of ministerial transition, significant staff turn-over, and a global pandemic thrown in, it might feel like a different kind of calamity has left the internal structures of First Church in some disarray. That’s ok too. There has been *a lot* of turmoil and change. There has been *a lot* for those of you who love First Church to steward and sustain. And yet, just as First Church rebounded from the fire to its building 55 years ago, I believe that same resiliency can help this congregation move forward again. The proverbial “bones” of the place are good. As the poet [Maggie Smith writes](#), “This this place could be beautiful, right? You could make this place beautiful.”

As I have listened this week, I have heard about leaks in the roof, committees that have dwindled, and places of conflict or in need of clarity. Unlike the parent of Maggie Smith’s poem, you have trusted me with the adult view of the whole of it. And amidst the lists of items in need of attention I have noticed again and again the love and devotion so many of you hold for this church. That love—that’s the good bones.

I know that many of you believe that too. And I also hear the weariness in many of your voices. I hear the grief for what you have lost through these hard years. I hear the longing for a more vibrant and sustainable future. Today lies between a fading past and a future not yet known.

Church consultant Susan Beaumont describes such moments of uncertainty as [a liminal time](#). Liminal comes from the Latin word *limen* or “threshold.” Liminal spaces are threshold spaces, in-between times when it is not yet clear what the future will be. In such times, Beaumont cautions against efforts to follow the traditional linear pattern of assessing the

current state of affairs, envisioning the preferred future, and then planning how to move from point A to point B. In contrast to this linear approach, Beaumont suggests that liminal times require us to adopt a learning posture of asking questions. She writes,

Learning in a liminal season isn't linear. It is cyclical. We revisit the same themes and challenges over and over, each time from a slightly different vantage point. We learn things. We unlearn things. We relearn what we thought we had already mastered.

Rather than sleek master plans declaring "how-to" move forward, liminal times require questions, curiosity, and a willingness to learn and relearn.

I know that I still have much to learn about you as individuals, committees, and as a congregation. And I heard your own questions about what First Church might look like in the future. What's next for First Church? For Unitarian Universalism? For religious life in the 21st century?

In this liminal time, no-one has clear answers. Instead, we are all gazing into a hazy future where patterns of the past can seem ill-fitting to challenges faced today.

While the answers may not be entirely clear, religious researchers are pointing to relevant trends. As you're likely aware, the trends do not look great. For example, in the latest analysis of the Pew Research Center on the [future of religion in America](#), the most likely prediction is that Christians could make up less than half of the U.S. population within a few decades. To reach this forecast, they track trends of "religious switching," which is to say the patterns of people changing religious affiliation—many from Christian to "none."

Unitarian Universalists are generally too small in number to be effectively tracked by Pew. But membership statistics on the Unitarian Universalist Association website for 1961-2020 suggest decline in UUism as well. According to the 2020 ["Widening the Circle of Concern Report"](#) issued by the UUA, there were closer to 819 congregations in 2020 rather than the 1000 congregations often referred to in UU discussions. While the numbers are not yet available online, the impact of the pandemic has stressed many congregations and there are likely more congregations that have elected to merge and/or close.

In the face of decline, religious leaders and congregations are seeking ways to reverse or at least slow the loss. Uncertain about the path forward, it can be easy to look back to times with more members for ideas on how to "fix" today's problems. But today's world does not look like the world of yesterday.

The *Widening the Circle of Concern* report also points to national demographic shifts towards more racial and ethnic diversity, including a rise in those who are multiracial. Increasingly we do not live in monocultural contexts, which changes expectations around cultural competency.

Additionally, *Widening the Circle*, names the bleaker future that many newer generations face relative to those nearer retirement. Rising costs of education, student loans, housing, and childcare places significant financial strain on today's younger adults.

And, after decades of headlines linking religion with violence, anti-LGBTQ bigotry, sexual misconduct of religious leaders, and more, many have soured on the very idea of religious affiliation.

All of this is to say, there are some pretty stiff headwinds for religious congregations these days—especially those that do not adapt to address the shifting multicultural context, the challenges facing younger adults, and the negative press of religious life.

But I for one still believe in church. Which is to say, that when I think of the world and what I know of people, we *need* places that help us to live meaningfully and well.

Last summer in a worship service at the General Assembly of UU's, the Rev. Sean Neil-Barron quipped: "My friends used to ask me why do I go to church?! After I became a minister, they stopped asking." But then, Sean added, "But the thing is, I never did. Why *do* I go to church?"

Continuing, Sean does not hold back in laying out the heartbreak and disappointment that he has witnessed at church. People misbehave in harmful and hurtful ways. People we care about leave. The music changes. We start to wonder if *we* should move on too. As he rather effectively lays out the challenges and conflicts of religious community, you start to wonder, wow, really, why bother with church!?

Last fall, I was chatting with a couple who asked, "What made you want to be a minister?" In response, I shared how I grew up loving church and after a period of theological searching, I found Unitarian Universalism where I felt I belonged. In Unitarian Universalism, I found both the multigenerational, religious community that I longed for from my childhood experiences *and* the theological openness I now deeply valued.

In other words, I wanted to belong to a religious community that would bring casseroles to people suffering loss *and* be okay questioning God. I wanted to belt out Christmas carols in a community that included five-year-olds seated near ninety-five year-olds, even if I didn't believe in the Virgin birth or identify as Christian anymore. I wanted a place to go and be with others in times of tragedy—when planes crashed into office towers or gun violence killed innocent children. And I wanted to be in relationship with people who identify as Buddhist, Muslim, or Hindu without condemning them to eternal torment for being born in a different cultural context or to parents who passed down a different religious tradition. In short, I wanted a community where I could bring the all of me, my doubts and my curiosity as well as my anger, my delights, and my heartbreaks.

To me religion is an essential part of being human. Amidst the flood of all that life brings, we need a way to navigate the complexity of choices and relationships. We need to be able to make sense of what is happening, or at least, to not feel alone as we encounter the inexplicable. Consciously or not, I believe we seek out places where we sense belonging and acceptance for who we are in our beliefs and our brokenness, our aspirations and our imperfect humanity. Whether we call it “religion” or not, I believe we will keep searching for meaning and for belonging—or suffer in loneliness and despair if we do not find it.

And so, when I think about what’s next for First Church, the questions I bring are these:

Why does sustaining First Church matter for the people of Back Bay and beyond?

What resources does First Church have to foster communities of belonging for more and more people of different ages, cultural and religious backgrounds, and more?

What might it mean for First Church to be a place of refuge and support for those struggling with despair, grief, or loneliness? For those facing injustice and inequity?

In what ways can First Church nurture spaces of celebration for all that is pretty nice and good about life?

Religious practices and institutions may evolve and change, but the human need for connection and meaning remains. In essence, even the [1630 Covenant of First Church](#) names both of these needs when it speaks of obedience to God—a source of meaning and purpose—as well as a commitment to walk together in mutual love and respect.

If you choose to call me as your minister, my pledge to you is that I will walk with you in moments of heartbreak and grief as well as in times of joyful news or shared experiences of beauty or laughter. Yes, belonging to a church can bring disappointments and conflicts, but it also can bring a deep sense of meaning and connection. When you show up for a Sunday service, a special event, or even a committee meeting, doing so is always about more than that one hour or that one task. Showing up builds and sustains community for yourself and for all the others who engage in the life and work of First Church in all manner of ways. And this still matters in a world full of people searching for a place to belong.

So may it be.

Amen.