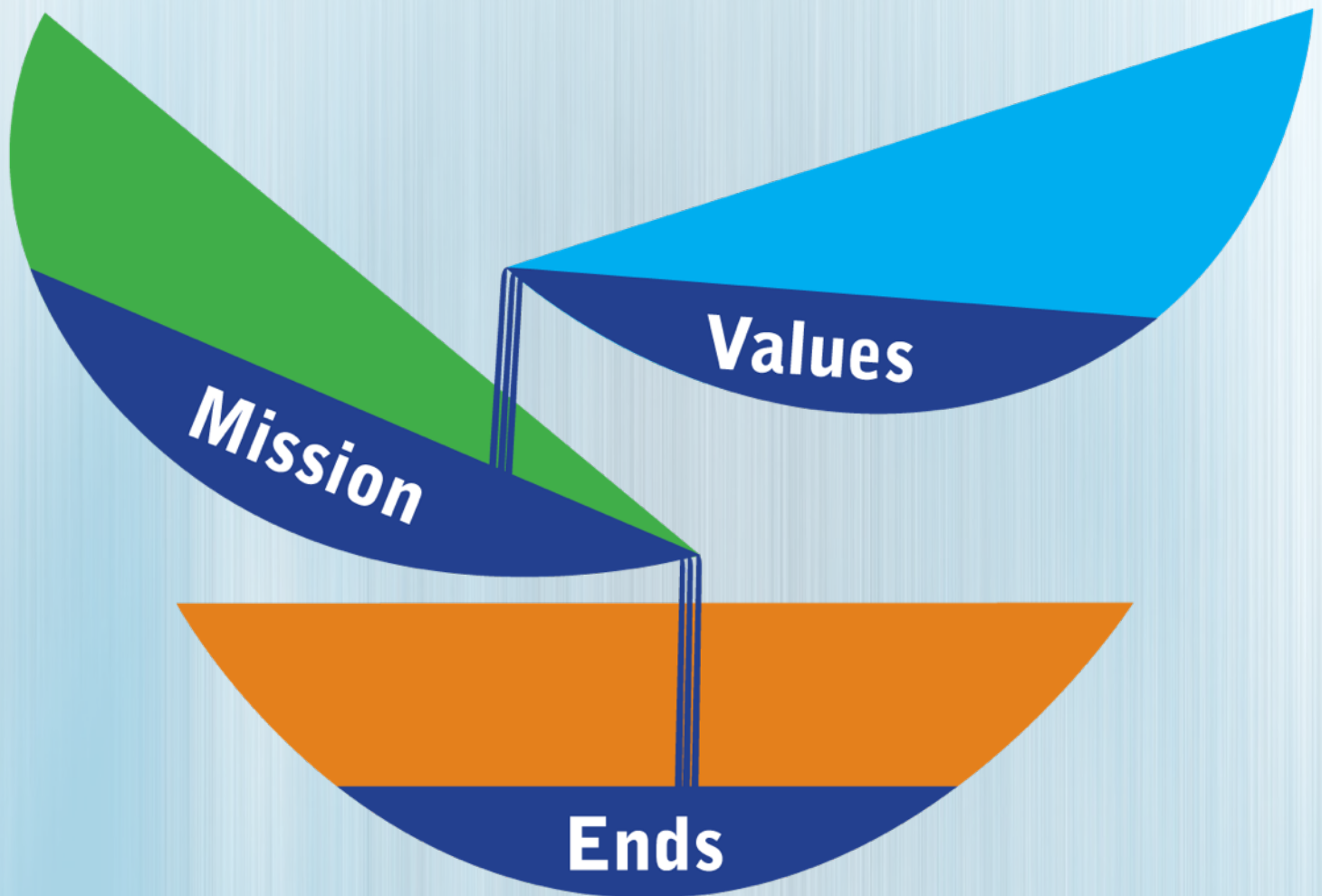


# The Commons

Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Spring 2016



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## Embracing Possibilities

What our thriving congregations do have in common are qualities of spirit and culture. They know who they are. They know where they are. They have a shared vision of what is possible right there, right now. What is our great opportunity? And what will it take to grasp that opportunity? Imagine what we might do in partnership with others. Imagine what we might do together.

*Adapted from Summer 2014 UU World article by UUA President Peter Morales.*

### The Commons



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## Beginnings, Ends and Possibilities

BY HELEN HENRY

**The crowded room was buzzing. Shoulders were hunched with heads leaning forward. Stories were being told. Stories were being listened to with intention. This was a holy moment.**

The crowded room was buzzing. Shoulders were hunched with heads leaning forward. Stories were being told. Stories were being listened to with intention. This was a holy moment.

This was the beginning of the “Capturing Our Ends” workshop. The purpose of the evening was to gather data from the congregation to then be used by the Board to define the values, mission, and ends of OUUC.

Facilitator, Laura Park had just asked the seventy-five participants of the Friday night workshop to tell of a personal experience that was a holy moment in their lives. There were stories of sweet, sorrowful minutes in a backyard garden after the loss of a loved one, and stories of the magnificence and mystery of the Grand Canyon. People went deep. This was just the beginning. The story tellers then met with other partners and discussed the core values embedded within their moments of the holy. That night the participants would tell more stories. Stories of times when they felt connected to the OUUC community in a meaningful, engaging, and affirming manner. “Helping at Books, Brownies and Beans...” “Hosting at Camp Quixote...” “Volunteering at the overnight shelter or Out of the Woods...” “Receiving care and compassion during a health crisis...”

These were the words that floated in the air. The participants recorded onto large sticky notes the highlights of those OUUC moments:

“I was useful.” “I felt welcomed.” “I felt reinforced for my efforts.” “I was of service.” Clearly these are people, not afraid to work hard, step out of their comfort zones, and serve others.

### Dreaming BIG

Finally the congregants got to dream BIG. They wrote out wishes for OUUC with no limitations. Wishes to “stop homelessness...” “increase numbers of young families and generate more life-long UU’s,” “grow tons of food for the food bank,” “provide day care or a community drop in space for families,” “rehabilitate those in prison, not just punish,” “Influence legislation regarding climate change.” There are more indications of hard working people who want to make a difference in the world. For the final activity of the evening, the participants transformed the night’s narrative into 2026 OUUC magazine covers, using markers, sticky foam shapes, colorful paper, scissors and glue. There was laughter, smiles and “oh yeahs!” This was the beginning. This was the beginning of seeing the possibilities.

### New Beginning for Board

Saturday morning it was a new beginning for the Board. After months of studying policy governance and discussing it in theory, we now had real data from our members. We took those sticky notes of Highlights and Wishes and categorized them into groups of similar thoughts or ideas. We also placed them in categories of Within, Among, and Beyond since it is useful to articulate ends in each of those categories. We noticed themes that emerged from the sticky notes as well as the magazine covers. From those themes we drew core values.



Values that describe us... the way we are as people. We re-examined our existing mission statement. We looked for the intersection of those values and mission. We began the crafting of the ends. Ends that define the difference OUUC wants to make in people’s lives.

### Work Still To Be Done

But this weekend was not the end. There is work still to be done. The board will gather feedback from the congregation to see if we have heard correctly what the members of OUUC believe and hold dear. It is the job of the Board to articulate the ends. The Board wants to get it right. The ends are important. The ends are our future. The ends are our gift to our new called minister. The ends are our possibilities. ✦

## The Geography of Possibilities

BY JAN SPILLER

Since arriving at OUUC in August 2014, Reverend Emily Melcher has served the congregation as its Interim Minister. Faithfully maintaining an “outside” perspective, she has engaged and guided us from an “inside” position, providing her a unique standpoint on OUUC. A settled minister is soon to be called and Emily’s two-year stewardship will end this summer. She graciously agreed to answer a few questions about OUUC’s possibilities ahead, how they might best be sorted out, and then embraced.

As interim minister, Emily came to OUUC in large part to prepare us for the selection and calling of a new settled minister. Part of her task, one might say, has been to “unsettle” us from hanging on to how things were—individually and collectively.

She called us to see change as opportunity, and led us in looking at it in new ways. Under her guidance and leadership, we’ve reflected and discerned in services, conversations and workshops about where we’ve



Jan Spiller

The Rev. Emily Melcher

been, and on what, why, and how, we do the things we do. As a result, change is afoot. We are in process. And in progress.

Her tenure now heads to its final phase, and we are prompted to look ahead to reflect on and discern the possibilities in the road ahead; to what calls us individually and as a liberal religious community; to what our time and gifts shall be dedicated toward in our individual lives, our congregational life, the greater community and world at large.

**JAN:** What barriers do you see we are likely to face in our discernment?

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Discernment responds not to the question, “What do we want to do next?” but to the religious question, “What are we called to do next?”

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**EMILY:** Jan, I love the way you’ve framed this question in terms of discernment and calling. I think that those words point to vital practices in a religious organization, a faith community. Discerning what’s next for you as individuals and as a congregation is radically different from deciding what’s next. And discerning your calling is radically different from deciding what you want to do next. That’s not to say that you don’t need to reach decisions, or that what you want doesn’t come into play, but it suggests that the work ahead is not merely cognitive or rational.

It’s not simply about having enough conversations to ensure the maximal buy-in before you proceed. Rather, it suggests that the work ahead must be grounded spiritually, that you must attend to the presence of spirit, whether you

find it in the still small voice within, the words of poets or prophets, the deepest longings of your hearts, the world’s greatest need, the experience of the sacred, or wisdom that lies beyond even your shared knowledge.

This attention to the sacred dimension of life ensures that your discernment responds not to the question, “What do we want to do next?” but to the religious question, “What are we called to do next?” It enables a congregation to move beyond simply perpetuating itself to engaging in truly transformative ministry.

OUUC has a long tradition of careful decision-making. You engage in thoughtful process and generally listen well to one another, and you have a strong commitment to consensus. These are fine qualities, but they are also limited and limiting in that they can tend to lead you away from listening for and attending to the bold, courageous decisions that a true calling, a religious purpose, requires.

**JAN:** What’s it going to take to move beyond them?

**EMILY:** It’s going to take a willingness to risk your comfort and proceed despite your doubts. OUUC has done this before which means you have a real strength you can build on as you move forward.

When I first arrived here and we did the history wall project together, so many of you wrote and spoke of the



# Possibilities

congregation's decision to host Camp Quixote. For many, it was a highlight, a time when you not only felt proud to be part of OUUC, but also when you agreed to move forward despite your doubts, because it was what your neighbors needed you to do. In the process of answering the world's call, many of you found that something in you was transformed.

**JAN: Civil Rights leader and founder of the Southern Fusion Coalition, Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II, whom you heard speak while in Selma, recently wrote that it's time to move social**

around our thoughts and our congregations, and by moving outward into a community of people who are not necessarily "like-minded." This is what fusion politics is all about: bringing people out of their bubbles and silos and into work on a shared moral agenda.

**JAN: Is there particular social justice work you think would be a good fit for us?**

**EMILY:** One of the things I deeply appreciate about the Southern Fusion Coalition and Dr. Barber's leadership is its capacity to draw people out of their silos and bubbles by recognizing the

congregation as well as a greater impact on the chosen justice issue, or whether OUUC will continue to support a variety of justice issues and initiatives.

You do have a clear track record and an ongoing commitment to ending homelessness. This congregation and its members have at various times carried on this work in all of the traditional ways: providing direct service and financial assistance to homeless individuals and shelters, educating the congregation and others about people experiencing homelessness and the realities of



*At the "Capturing Our Ends" workshop, attendees shared stories of connection with the holy, with OUUC and with dreaming big.*

justice to the moral high ground, "from the banquet to the battleground." It seems important we come to agreement on how high we want to set the bar. What's needed for us to push to the edge of our comfort zone?

**EMILY:** Perhaps more than anything else, including convictions and values, human beings are compelled to action by their connections with others. It's altogether too easy for Unitarian Universalists to live in a bubble, interacting primarily with others who share not only our values but also our demographics. This is our version of "banquet." I believe we will move beyond our comfort zones (our "banquet") when we are in accountable relationships with people who are unlike us and who actually call us to be unlike ourselves, by moving beyond the narrow circles we draw

deepest values (the moral high ground) they have in common, the values that undergird and transcend their particular issues. This is a groundswell of commitment not just to one issue but to a radical, systemic transformation from systems of oppression to systems of justice.

I think what focus your justice work takes is less important than that you come to see furthering justice as the compelling religious purpose for OUUC's existence and ensuring that you are continually building coalitions and working with others who are similarly committed.

In the coming months and years, you will need to clarify whether the congregation's justice work will focus on a particular issue allowing broader engagement and deeper connections within the

homelessness, bearing witness to the needs of the homeless and the barriers to housing for all, and advocating in the halls of power for systemic change.

You also have a history of working in partnership not only with your neighbors experiencing homelessness, but with other congregations and government to bring about change. Indeed, to the extent that you are known in the wider community and the wider UU world, it is largely for your work with and on behalf of people experiencing homelessness. That doesn't mean this must forever be the work to which you are called, but it suggests the strength of a compelling congregational initiative that engages the whole congregation in ways that transform the congregation itself.

**SEE GEOGRAPHY, PG 14**

## A primer on policy governance

BY THE REV. EMILY MELCHER

**Policy governance is an elegant, fully-integrated system of governance that empowers a congregation to discover and live into its mission.**

Under policy governance the Board engages the congregation in discerning its most deeply cherished values, strengths and purpose, and then drafts an “ends” statement that articulates these things. The congregation’s ends then give direction to everything the congregation does.

The Board delegates the responsibility for the realization of the ends to an Executive (typically the Minister) whom it empowers to direct the congregation’s resources and programs toward that goal. The Executive is held accountable not just for achieving the ends but for doing so within the Board’s clearly defined limitations that ensure such essential things as prudent financial planning and management, protection of assets, and fair treatment of staff and members.

Thus, the Executive has the responsibility to achieve the ends and the authority to direct the operations of the church in the achievement of those ends within certain prescribed limitations.

This does NOT mean that the executive does everything or makes every decision alone. Rather, the executive works with and through paid and volunteer staff, committees, teams, task forces, etc. to

accomplish the ends, and to ensure that it is done within the limitations articulated by the Board.

A Ministries Restructuring Team, charged by last



Emily Melcher

year’s Executive Team to suggest a more nimble, flexible and responsive structuring of OUUC’s operations, has recommended that operations be grouped into five ministry areas with an “Accountable Person” (typically staff) for each area. In this suggested structure which is similar to those used by other congregations in policy governance, each Accountable Person has the responsibility and the authority to ensure that the resources and programs within their purview are directed toward the identified ends of the congregation and their work carried out within limitations that ensure the health of the congregation. This means that, once this or a similar restructuring plan is enacted, each Accountable Person will have the authority to structure committees, teams, and programs within their area of accountability, further delegating responsibility and authority to those groups for their role in achieving the ends.

At every level, there is delegation of responsibility and the associated authority needed to fulfill the responsibility. The congregation elects a Board of Trustees and empowers it to lead the congregation. It does so not simply as it sees fit, but through a process of discernment with the congregation which results in a clarification of the congregation’s purposes (ends). The Board then delegates responsibility and authority for achieving the ends, within limitations, to an Executive whom it also holds accountable.

While the Executive reports to the Board, he/she is accountable to the ends. The Executive then delegates responsibility and authority to Accountable Persons (one for each ministry area) for ensuring that each committee, team, group, and program within their ministry area is

directed toward the ends, and supports the overall health of the congregation. The Accountable Persons report to the Executive, but they are accountable to the ends. The Accountable Persons further delegate the responsibility and authority appropriate to each committee, team, group, and program in their ministry area. The committees, teams, groups, and programs report to the Accountable Person, but are accountable to the ends.

The Accountable Persons meet together with the Executive on a regular basis to ensure effective communications and coordination across ministry areas.

Policy Governance allows for everything the congregation does to be directed toward the ends of the congregation. It creates clarity of roles: the Board as visionary leaders of the congregation, the Executive as operational leader, the Congregation as partners in both visionary and operational leadership through participation in discerning the ends and in carrying out the ministries of the congregation. It delegates responsibility and authority at every level, and holds every level accountable to the ends through a clear reporting structure.

It’s been several years since Harmon Eaton and other visionary leaders first brought the idea of policy governance to OUUC. This interim period has been a time of intense work, particularly on the part of the Board, to move toward full implementation of Policy Governance. I trust that the clarity it provides about roles, responsibility, accountability and authority will help get your next settled ministry off to a good start, and the focus it will bring to the ministries of the congregation will enable you to reach new heights together! ✦

## Are end statements really goals?

BY GAIL GOSNEY WREDE

**At OUUC we have been talking about policy governance and “ends statements” for what seems like decades, but has really been about six years.**

There have been skeptics and proponents and the questioning majority. More than one person has asked, So what are ‘ends statements’? What’s the point? Do they really work? Aren’t “Ends Statements” really just goals by another name?

Ends Statements prescribe what results are to be produced, for whom, and at what cost. The goals statements that we at OUUC are used to developing and achieving are more focused on goals and the means to achieving those goals.

We’re very used to writing goals and achieving them. In 2011, the OUUC Board of Trustees developed a 2012-2018 Long Range Plan. In reading over the Long Range Plan, it is pretty amazing how forward-thinking the Board was at the time and how far we have come in achieving those goals. Here are some examples:

*Promote individual spiritual growth and transformational worship through increased and ongoing opportunities for personal and communal ministry and spiritual growth.*



Gail Gosney Wrede

•Over the past four years, OUUC has increased the number of opportunities for spiritual growth by offering increased and expanded religious

education classes for children, youth and adults.

- The Circles of the Spirit program has been expanded and is now coordinated with monthly spiritual themes to increase the depth of personal and congregational exploration of the meaning of such concepts as risk, vulnerability, creativity and others.
- Opportunities for spiritual exploration and growth have been offered through laughter yoga, vespers, voice classes and specific classes on various world religions.

network and expanded the Sewing Ministry efforts to bring joy and comfort to members and friends through gifts of handmade quilts.

- The Family Ministry Committee has re-introduced monthly dinners for OUUC members and friends.
- The Membership Committee and others have worked to expand and enhance activities to ensure that OUUC is a welcoming congregation.

We are a congregation of caring “doers” and we get work DONE. What has been missing in the past has been “for what purpose”?

### Ends Statements prescribe what results are to be produced, for whom, and at what cost

*Increase our congregation’s awareness of how generosity of time, energy, knowledge/skill, money and friendship can be both spiritual and transformational.*

- In the past five years, since OUUC began the “Share the Plate” program, the congregation has contributed over \$75,000 to charitable organizations in Thurston County.
- Members of OUUC have been central partners in the efforts to reduce and end homelessness through the gifts of their time, leadership and money in partnership with Out-of-the-Woods, Camp Quixote, Quixote Village, and Sidewalk.

*Expand and maintain services, activities and opportunities for community connection among OUUC members.*

- In the past four years, OUUC has maintained the Caring Friends

Stating that we will increase our members awareness of how generosity can be a transformational and spiritual act does not help us understand how that generosity will impact and perhaps change the lives of people in our congregation and our community.

In the example of personal generosity, an “ends statement” may read more like: “By 2020, OUUC will be known regionally as a congregation who changes lives, both for its members and for our community, through deepened, sustained acts of generosity of time, effort and financial resources.”

This may seem like semantics to many, but in fact, the use of “ends statements” will assist OUUC in ensuring that its communal actions are intentional and have positive impact for its members and for our community. ✦



## Possibilities of policy governance

BY HELEN HENRY

**In April 2011 the congregation voted to become a Policy Governance (PG) church. I was a relatively new member and raised my hand in approval. I admit I didn't really understand what I was voting for, but I trusted the leadership who was recommending this new form of governing.**

Now, five years later, I'm beginning my second year on the board. I've learned a LOT in the past year about policy governance. I've had the privilege of sitting in meetings with Rev. Melcher and hearing her explain, and re-explain, how it works. Rev. Melcher has been through this transition with other congregations. She has hands-on experience with PG. (See her article on page 6.)

I've read parts of Caroline Oliver's book *Getting Started with Policy Governance* and Dr. John Carver's *The Policy Governance Model*. Being a teacher by profession, I've struggled with terms from the business world but have learned to translate them into the words I'm familiar with from the organizations of schools.

I listened to Rev. Keyes, founder of Interim Ministry Guild. He spoke to a small group, and then preached on a Sunday describing the workings of PG. I remember his saying he

thought of PG as "organized love." He also said that the worst thing a church can do is try to instill PG at the same time retaining some of the old committee model.



Helen Henry

"Policy governance doesn't work if you don't do policy governance."

Oliver uses the model of riding a bike. You can't really do it in baby steps. You have to just jump on and go. Training wheels can actually slow the learning. You will crash several times, but you get back up, apply a band-aid if necessary, and go again.

The board has spent several hours with Laura Park, a consultant from Unity Consulting in Minneapolis. She specializes in assisting churches transitioning to PG. We had a weekend retreat in October followed by several Skype meetings and then a full day Saturday following the Friday night "Capturing the Ends" workshop (see article page 3). Laura is a master at painting the "big picture" of PG and helping us see how the puzzle pieces of the board and the congregation and the minister fit together to form the big picture.

So here is what I've learned...

### THE MINISTER

In PG the board has set clear ends based on the data from the congregants. It is the minister's responsibility to move the congregation forward to meet those ends. PG is a model that frees the executive (chief minister) to make decisions efficiently. Laura Park called it a "nimbleness of response." The minister can make quick decisions without consulting several committees or waiting for a Board meeting. According to Rev. Keyes, "The minister has more freedom to execute. An executive team slows things down...you want responsibility, authority and accountability in a single executive."

That doesn't mean the minister has ultimate power to do anything he/

she wishes. In PG there are specific written policy limitation, adopted by the Board. (See Rev. Melcher's article on page 6.) Simply put by Laura Parks, "They can do anything that isn't stupid, illegal or immoral." A minister can, but will not always, act in isolation. He/she can call on consultants from the congregation and form ad hoc committees for certain tasks.

The minister also works closely with "Accountable Persons" (usually staff) making decisions regarding resources and programs. (Again, see Rev. Melcher's article page 6.) The minister is held accountable by the Board. Some people worry that a PG minister will be too busy "administering" and not have enough time to "minister." (I just recently noticed how similar the words administrator and minister are.) Rev. Keyes views administering as part of ministry. "It is not at odds to have a calling to serve or be a spiritual leader and be an executive." Effective executive decision making enhances the ministry of a church.

Some people worry that an executive/minister won't have time to provide traditional pastoral care. Of course the minister would reach out in time of great need, but we are already a church that is too large for a minister to reach every congregant in time of stress. We've had a pastoral care committee for years. When people told their OUUC stories at the "Capturing the Ends" workshop (pg. 3) they weren't always about the minister's care. In fact, few stories actually involved the minister. Many stories were of receiving care and comfort from members of their beloved community.

### THE CONGREGANTS

Under PG the congregation does not






decide operations like the color of the linoleum but members of the congregation are not left out. PG is democratic. Churches that have operated under PG say MANY MORE people are involved. Keyes says, "Let the minister run the church and the laity do the ministry."

OUC is filled with people who are hard-working and actively want to minister—to make a difference in the world. In fact, PG encourages more member participation than is often seen in a traditional model with long standing committees that, let's face it, are often hard to fill.

Good ideas from members can come to fruition as long as they are in line with the ends and have multiple supporters. Procedures will be in place informing how projects or ideas can come to life. Those ideas will be presented to the minister or "accountable persons" and decisions made based on the alignment with the articulated ends. Just like the board defines ends and limitations, the executive will in turn define ends for each ministry area and limitations on how those may be achieved.

## THE BOARD

Rev. Keyes says, "The Board is the first word, instead of the last." Under PG the board is not operational.  It is not focused on procedures. It is focused on the BIG picture—the ends. The board listens actively to the congregation then charts the course. It is responsible for the direction the church is heading, for determining what change we want to make in the world, and for whom.

I love the cover graphic that Martha Guilfoyle designed. It is different than the other logo of nested bowls with 'values' being the bottom bowl, 'mission' the middle and 'ends' the top. Martha's graphic shows the flow from top down. To me, PG will be a flowing form of governing. The board reviews the values, mission and ends and possibly changes them based on periodic input from the congregation. The ends direct the

minister in his/her decision making and the board holds the minister accountable to meet the ends.

It is an exciting time to be on the Board. It is a thoughtful "heady" challenging time, and I have felt privileged to be a part of it.

Yes, PG involves change but not just change for change sake or for a slight improvement. It offers the possibility to make a BIG difference. It may not happen fast but ten years from now, I believe OUC will be doing even more great things. +



## Resources for policy governance

*Boards That Make a Difference: A New Design for Leadership in Nonprofit and Public Organizations* by John Carver (Jossey-Bass, 1990, 2nd edition, 1997)

*Governance and Ministry: Rethinking Board Leadership* by Dan Hotchkiss (Alban Institute, 2009)

*Reinventing Your Board: A Step-by-Step Guide to Implementing Policy Governance* co-authored by John Carver and Miriam Mayhew Carver (Jossey-Bass, 1997)

*The Policy Governance Fieldbook: Practical Lessons, Tips and Tools from the Experience of Real-World Boards* (Jossey-Bass, 1999) Caroline Oliver (ed.), Mike Conduff, Susan Edsall, Carol Gabanna, Randee Loucks, Denise Paszkiewicz, Catherine Raso, and Linda Stier

Website: Unity Consulting (<http://www.unityconsulting.org/index.html>) Helps UU congregations answer powerful questions about values and mission and choose a governance structure to help them realize their mission in the world. +

## Church, you say?

BY MAUREEN CANNY

Thought you gave that up long ago...

Well, it's not a church of Stained glass and novenas, Hierarchy and guilt.

It's more a community Of free-ish thinkers.

With studies of history and science, And how to cook with lentils.

Plenty of dialogue-peppered theology too.

There is less after-life And more about this life.

Literalism is cast aside.

Heresy, and curiosity, And ancient stories as stories, Embraced.

There are hymns, And sometimes a fiddle and a French horn.

Shared art, and coffee, and campsites,

Marches for equality and a passion for justice,

And banners for our planet's health.

Joys and laughter, and sorrows, deeply felt.

An empathetic generosity, Of spirit, of action, of assets.

Nurturing dreams of living gently, In peace.

So yes, Church, I say

But now it means much more. +



Maureen Canny

# Possibilities

## Learning from child-driven education

BY SARA LEWIS



**What is child-driven education? Child-driven or child-led education describes an approach that tries to leave room (how much room varies) for the child to choose what interests, goals, and learning they will pursue.**

This philosophy, as espoused by educators such as John Holt, says that children (and really all of us of any age) learn best when we are

intrinsically motivated by our own interest. All that is really required for learning and growing to occur (transformation) is a motivated learner and an



Sara Lewis

interesting challenge or environment. Some really cool experiments in this idea have been conducted by Sugata Mitra with the “hole-in-the-wall” experiment where a computer was put in a wall in an area not-served by any formal schooling, and in the absence of

actually felt a bit snug! Our nursery is consistently just under maximum capacity during the 11:00 worship service. We have had 23 kids (not all at the same time, thankfully!) attend our pre-K Spirit Play class on Sunday mornings so far this church year, and there are 24 children

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**I absolutely believe that humans are already natural learners and meaning-makers, and will do this best when they have the freedom. This learner-driven process takes a leap of faith and can look like chaos!**

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any instruction children taught themselves how to use it and then used it to learn more.

Here at OUUC, our lifespan religious education programs are busy! This year’s 4<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> grade, “Our Whole Lives” class (that’s our sexuality education program), had 18 kids in it—our big classrooms

registered for our elementary grades Labyrinth Learning Class. Meanwhile, our Middle School group has 13 youth attending with remarkable consistency. While our High School group is small they are mighty: youth are volunteering as RE teachers, working in the nursery, serving on committees,



# Possibilities

working with Interfaith Works to organize an interfaith youth meeting, getting trained as peer chaplains, attending District Youth Conferences, making gifts to donate to Safe Place, organizing fundraisers and supply drives, and more—all while juggling heavy homework loads, the SAT's, drivers ed, and other community involvement.

And then we get to our Adult Education program! We had 130+ adults take at least one of our classes this year with some classes having over 35 participants. And through all of this, we hope to open minds, fill hearts, and transform



lives. We are growing and transforming here.

How can I, as your Director of Lifespan Religious Education, keep up with all of that? Well, goodness, I have so many plans! And lists! And stated goals and outcomes! I have calendars, lesson plans, document sharing platforms, budgets, reports, meetings, shopping lists, storage closets, rolling carts, and teams of staff and volunteers to keep up with it all. Keeping track of all of that can feel like I just need to hold on tight. I can feel like I need to be in control. I need to know where we are going, to lay out the map. I need to be driving this truck.

Fortunately, the children in particular are good at reminding me otherwise. When I think I have a great story to illustrate one idea, they will find something unexpected in it. When the discussion questions are trying to support one learning outcome, the kids have a way of asking new

questions that might take us down another path in that lesson. And when I already have the whole church year planned out, the kids may ask to do something completely different.

Theoretically, I love child-driven education. I absolutely believe that humans are already natural learners and meaning-makers, and will do this best when they have the freedom—that free and responsible search for truth and meaning we speak of in our UU Principles.

But I say theoretically. Theoretically because it is actually hard to leave



the room for this free search, for this learner-driven process that can look like chaos. It can mean that we have to take a leap of faith—something that we UU's might balk at! We have to trust the process, trust the learners, trust the people, trust the seeds that we plant that we may never be around to harvest. This makes child-driven or people-driven education a challenge!

I was recently part of a training module (we call them “Renaissance Modules”) for religious educators on the topic of curriculum. The definition of curriculum that we were working with was “a course to be run”, and I like that definition. And yet, we all spoke of the difficulty of designing a single course for all our people and saying “this is the way”. The plan we lay out may be the right way for some but not for all.

The final project for that training was to get in groups and design a curriculum together. We all had

ideas, and through a consensus process formed up into little groups to work on them. I was very fortunate to have my idea—based on something our kids at OUUC have actually asked for—be chosen as a project. This is like getting to double-dip and use your homework in real-life! My group sat down to talk about how we would design a curriculum for a child-driven service project for elementary aged students. We were able to write a great Intro Lesson and to lay out a plan for reflection and sharing with the congregation. But in the middle of our plan we had to simply write



“and then we do whatever the kids want to do”. What if they chose something wacky? Well, we would try to help them do it.

The leader of the training pointed out our courage to put forth a plan like that. It does take a lot of courage, especially for someone who is held accountable for results, to say “I don't know what we'll end up doing”.

But that is exactly what I think we all—not just educators—need to leave more room for. We need to leave room for unknown possibilities. If we already know where we are going, how we are going to get there, and everything else, what is the point of the journey? We have to leave room for growth, for change, for new people and new ideas. We have to leave at least a little bit of the map blank. Because this keeps us vibrant, flexible, alive, and not just agents of transformation, but open to being transformed. +



## Embracing a spectrum of labels

BY TAMISA BESAW

**The new year brings new possibilities. I am sitting here on this cold March morning watching the rain fall from the branches of a bare maple tree.**

There is a small amount of new growth evident. I can see the tiny red buds at the tips of each branch. It is telling me that it has survived the Winter and will grow stronger in the Spring. There's a poem in there I think. A poem and a promise. Life flourishes after it endures hardship. I need that reassurance. We all do.

Within the span of twelve months, both of my beautiful children were diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, a neurological disorder that emerges in early child hood. It typically presents with communication deficits, repetitive behaviors, and withdrawn social and emotional behaviors. I went through an awkward sort of grieving after these diagnoses. I felt guilty because I did not know if my tears came from disappointment or from the heartache of knowing that my kids' lives would have extra challenges that most kids did not have to overcome.

Then I decided it did not matter. I had work to do. There were appointments to make, binders to set up, evaluations to schedule. I had to get my oldest, whose challenges are a bit more significant, enrolled in a developmental preschool for kids

with ASD. I had to learn about IEPs (Individual Education Plans) and what my rights are and what my son Dylan's rights are. I had to find the right services for both children.



Tamisa Besaw

I had two sets of appointments and therapies to coordinate: Speech Therapy, Occupational Therapy, and ABA Therapy or Applied Behavior Analysis for each child. I didn't have the time or emotional space to process a lot of complex feelings. I only had room for one feeling - determination.

We have a tight schedule these days. The kids have school and therapies until 6:00 PM every weekday and Dylan is on a feeding program. For a couple of years, he would only eat five things: bread, cheese, yogurt, peanut butter, and milk. Now he eats about five times that, but we still have a long way to go. Even the weekends are restricted by his feeding schedule. We make exceptions for holidays and birthdays, but try to stick to his schedule as much as possible.

Bed time is challenging since both kids need snuggles in order to fall asleep, so my husband and I each put a kid to bed every night. It usually takes about half an hour before they doze off, which is a huge improvement from an hour and a half. Our youngest, Andra,

retirement plans, financial plans, career plans, and our wills. It will be a consideration in every major decision we make. We have to prepare ourselves for the fact that one or both children may need to live with us for the rest of our lives. That leads to a lot of unanswered questions about their care after we die. There is just so much to consider, so much to worry about.

However, there are also still a lot of unknowns. We don't know how the children will progress with their therapies. Will they stall, regress, or improve developmentally? Will they ever catch up to their peers? How do we prepare for an uncertain future? It is easy to get overwhelmed with all of this. The bad part is not knowing how this story turns out. The good part is...not knowing how this story turns out.

There are people and organizations out in the wider world that would have us believe Autism is an epidemic. They talk about Autism and people who have Autism in terms that are honestly quite terrifying. They focus on the

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**They will have autism their whole lives but autism will not define their lives. Dylan and Andra will!**

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still wakes up throughout the night. It takes three or four times of taking her back to her bed before she finally sleeps through until morning. Most nights I just end up falling asleep in her bed.

Things are flowing pretty smoothly at the moment, and we have a routine now. My husband and I have started to process our own feelings and concerns about the kids and what Autism Spectrum Disorder means for them and for our family life. It is time to get philosophical about it all. For my husband and me, Autism will affect our

"disorder" in ASD when it would be more appropriate to focus on the "spectrum". In some ways it is like putting every illness under the umbrella term, "sick". Would you put chicken pox and cancer on the same spectrum?

There are some people with Autism that are seriously disabled. They cannot feed themselves, dress themselves, or communicate, and are often institutionalized. Then there are people with Autism who are socially awkward and have some behavioral rigidity (like having to eat the same thing every day),

## More inviting?

BY JIM ANEST

To me there is a fundamental creative tension between having a congregation that “shares our values” and one that “stretches our values”. Both are essential. Diversity is what stretches us. But what kinds of diversity? Many of us consider “diversity” in terms of race, gender or sexual orientation. We might want to think of diversity in even broader terms such as cognitive diversity (what you are aware of) and value diversity (what is important to you). I am interested in exploring together what you and I value, need, and prioritize, and how those arise from our life experiences.

Regardless of how you define diversity, I believe that OUUC could do better in achieving it. Key to any strategy to invite or welcome those who for any reason we might see (or they might see themselves) as “other” would include meeting newcomers more on their terms than on our own. In our conversations and activities, it is sometimes implied that if only others read the books that we read, use the words we use, or otherwise understand the world the way we do, they would see the light, join the UUs and be more like us!

I suspect that a key component to any strategy for better outreach starts with a greater commitment to deeper listening... then checking again and again to be sure that visitors experience that they are being heard. We need to create conditions which makes others feels safe, welcome and valued. Curiosity on our part is essential. Authentic relationships require an essential mutuality, earned

trust and perhaps some degree of vulnerability. If we are serious about creating new relationships, we will be asked to stretch and grow, sometimes in ways that feel uncomfortable. ✦



Jim Anest

but otherwise live relatively normal and independent lives. Both people would be diagnosed with ASD.

When we tell people that our kids have Autism, we get a wide range of reactions. Many people make a mental jump to “Rain man”, Temple Grandin, or they have no point of reference for autism at all. Some say things like, “Oh, I never would have guessed. They don’t look Autistic.”. Some people cry and pray over them. Other people share stories about

### We get to decide what autism looks like in our house.

people they know with Autism. Most people say, “I’m sorry”.

Believe me when I say that there is nothing to be sorry about. Our children bring us an extraordinary amount of pride and joy. I say that not as a defensive parental response. I say that because our children’s Autism presents itself in such a way that does not inhibit affection. They do have issues with delayed speech and still struggle with language expressively and receptively. They do not pick up on social cues and tend to be awkward. They have some behavior issues with self regulation, rigidity, sleep, and eating. All of the challenges we have are made easier to bear because they have always been affectionate and emotionally connected to us. So many families with Autism do not have this experience.

Now, here is the good part. Our children are only four and five years old. They don’t know that they have Autism yet. Whatever the wider world might have to say about autism, we are still our children’s guide in this life. We can turn some of that rigid behavior into determination. Some of that social awkwardness could turn out to be the strength of their character that keeps them from caving in to unhealthy peer pressure. Autism is a

fact in our family and we get to decide what autism looks like in our house. They will have the autism label for their whole lives, but it will not define their lives. It may inform many of our decisions, but they are so much more than “autistic”.

By not knowing how this story turns out, we get to take an active role in writing it. We make a conscious decision to tune out the negative and focus on what is possible for these two amazing kids. The Autism diagnosis led to productive therapies for them that we could not access otherwise. We have seen huge improvements in both children socially. They love people and they thrive on social praise. Language is coming along, slowly. The rest...well, it is still early days. They will likely be in their therapies for years to come, but their personalities are blossoming. Dylan is inclined to math and reading. Andra has a

### By not knowing how this story turns out, we get to take an active role in writing it.

dramatic flair and likes to sing and perform. We can nurture these gifts and still offer challenges to stretch their social and behavior skills while trying to also broaden their interests.

The label is what it is. They will end up with a lot more throughout life, some that they choose and some that are given to them. None of us are defined by a single label. They mean something, but not everything. This label, autism, will be a heavy factor in our lives for the foreseeable future. But we will put our hope in the possibility that its weight will lessen over time and make room for new ones: dancer, artist, writer, mathematician, runner, scientist, Girl Scout, engineer. We will let Dylan and Andra decide those labels. ✦

# Possibilities

FROM PAGE 5

## GEOGRAPHY

This winter/spring, the Board is working in partnership with the congregation to discern and articulate the congregation's "Ends Statement," (the statement that answers the question: What difference does OUUC intend to make, and for whom?). It is likely that the ends will be pivotal in OUUC's ongoing discernment about its justice work.

**JAN:** Are there some things you think the congregation should not take on at this point?

**EMILY:** I believe the congregation should refrain from taking on new initiatives until the ends of the congregation have been clarified. Once that happens, the congregation's energy and attention, as well as its human, financial and programmatic resources (all of which are finite), will be directed to furthering those ends. To accomplish this, the ministries of the congregation will be aligned with those ends, and clear guidelines developed for the vetting of new initiatives.

One of these guidelines will likely be that the congregation should not take on anything that doesn't have the commitment (not just the theoretical support, but the commitment of time and energy) of a substantial number of members of the congregation.

Furthermore, as an interim minister, I am bound to be cautious about supporting any new initiatives that require ongoing ministerial support lest my support during the interim time encumber the next settled minister. For that reason as well, OUUC will remain in a bit of a holding pattern with regard to new programs through the remaining months of my ministry with you.

**JAN:** Once we have chosen what we will commit our joint attention, time and energy towards, what challenges and/or pitfalls might we be wise to expect, even prepare for?

**EMILY:** The biggest pitfall that UU congregations make is that they say "Yes!" to every member or friend who wishes to use the congregation to support their personal or pet initiative. With a couple of notable exceptions, OUUC has not yet learned to say "No" to initiatives that don't have broad congregational support, and it will likely be painful when and if you do. The ability of your called, hired, elected and appointed leaders (your minister, staff, and lay leadership) to compassionately stay the course will determine whether and how you live into your ends.

The other challenge is a cultural one. Overall, OUUC seems to respect its leaders, and to confidently entrust them with the power to lead. Nevertheless, as you move toward greater clarity of roles, responsibility, accountability and authority, and away from a less democratic system that allows for influence by dint of longevity, financial contributions, turf or entitlement, you will find pockets of resistance. This resistance is absolutely predictable (and natural!); the rewards of moving through it are renewed commitment to a congregational vision, heightened engagement and excitement in the congregation, deeper connections and commitment, and a greater impact in the world.

You're a terrific congregation with great potential. It is my prayer for you that you realize ever more of that potential. ✦

## Becoming Grandma

BY JOSIE SOLSENG

This new little person  
I already love  
With his dark hair  
And serious eyes  
That seem to know me

This new mother  
I've loved so long



Josie Solseng

Baby girl all grown  
Learning my love's depth  
Through her new son ✦



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