

“WHAT WE HAVE ACCOMPLISHED TOGETHER...”

Rev. Scott W. Alexander, Preaching

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Vero Beach, Florida

Well, dear friends...on this second-to-the-last-sermon that I will deliver as your settled minister (and please be with us next Sunday when I deliver my retirement ***“Aloha”*** sermon, to be followed by a festive/indoor Hawaiian summer picnic!)...But this morning I want to take a retrospective look at how far we have come together – over the last eleven years as minister and congregation – and see what we (in collaborative partnership) have accomplished together. **In a nutshell (and in the overview) I am happy to report that, I believe that by almost ANY measure – objective, antidotal, or intuitive – we have together greatly strengthened both the institutional, spiritual, and human fabric of this congregation, thus securing the future health of Unitarian Universalism here on the Treasure Coast.**

To really understand just how far we have institutionally come, I must take us back to the Spring of 2010, when,

on Sunday, April 18th, I accepted (with great joy) your unanimous call to become your new settled minister. Now you should know that in the previous months, I had interviewed with no fewer than 7 UU congregations (all around the United States) who were seeking a minister – and although there were larger (and more financially secure) congregations available for me to serve, I chose to come to UUFVB because it seemed like the most exciting (and potentially rewarding) place for me to practice ministry as I moved into the last phase of my career.

Here is what I knew eleven years ago. This stable congregation of 180 members had (just 4 years earlier when it was only 135 members) taken an incredibly bold leap by purchasing this beautiful and expansive campus into which to grow. Not being satisfied to remain a small congregation, you had sold your darling/little campus

[Picture of previous fellowship building on 43rd Avenue is projected up on the chancel screens]



(with terribly limited parking) on 43rd Avenue to the Synagogue next door, put all your cash on the table, borrowed over 1.3 million dollars from the bank (and some generous members) totally rehabilitated the abandoned/hurricane-damaged building, and (in short order) started two income producing enterprises (*The Bridges Early Learning Center* and *The Emerson Center*)

to help pay for the expenses involved in maintaining such an expansive campus.

[PICTURE OF OLD UUFVB BUILDING COMES DOWN OFF SCREENS]

Although by the time I interviewed for the job everything in the plan seemed to be working pretty smoothly, it was clear to me (and to your clear-eyed lay leadership at the time) that if **anything** went wrong – if the school's enrollment dropped...or the Emerson Center events suddenly failed to attract customers...or the Fellowship stopped growing -- the whole institution could very quickly be in deep and dire financial trouble.

[PICTURE OF PEOPLE IN OVERLOADED ROWBOAT GOES UPON SCREENS]



One image that the Board of Trustees and I referred to back then – frankly -- was that financially UUFVB was

rather like an overloaded rowboat, with the water ominously lapping at the gunwales! As long as all three entities (the congregation, the Emerson Center and the Bridges school) which contributed to our finances were successful (all rowing steadily forward as planned) we would be able to pay our mortgage and keep the boat afloat. But if anything unexpected happened to disrupt any of these three income streams, we might well sink into debt and be forced to sell this wonderful facility and struggle to find a new/suitable home.

[PICTURE OF PEOPLE IN ROWBOAT COMES DOWN OFF CHANCEL SCREENS]

I frankly knew (therefore) that coming here to be your minister was something of a professional risk for me...and I told several trusted colleagues at the time that this Vero Beach job might not be a terribly secure one if we got into financial trouble. But with enthusiasm I accepted your call, because (unlike so many UU congregations – the majority, really -- that are timid and unwilling to take risks on behalf of the future) I saw you folks repeatedly willing to take huge and daring leap on behalf of your congregation and our faith.

This congregation seemed to me like that self-confident locomotive character of that favorite children's book *"The Little Engine That Could"* ...

[PICTURE OF BOOK JACKET GOES UP ON THE SCREENS]



that optimistically chanting to itself as it chugged up the steep mountain grade, *"I think I can...I think I can!...I think I can!"*

When I decided to come here, I was pretty sure that given your pluck and daring we could meet the financial (and other) challenges that stretched before us and get to the top of that mountain!

Well, eleven years later, I am so happy and relieved to say that **WE GOT THERE!** Despite some nerve-wracking moments here and there (including several unexpected challenging economic realities and the vast disruptions of the COVID epidemic) our congregation has always

managed kept things moving in the right direction. We have experienced steady membership growth (even including 25 new folks who joined us during this challenging COVID year!)...our two enterprises are successful and well-regarded in the community (Bridges Early Learning Center's enrollment is strong, and the Emerson Center post-covid is now looking forward to a full year of community concerts and other events) ...thanks to the steady commitment of our membership, and some really generous one-time gifts, we have retired our mortgage, and all our debts are now paid!...our facility is structurally sound and beautiful...our million-dollar budget is healthy and balanced...and our congregational future here on the corner of 27th Avenue and 16th Street is strong and secure! **WHEW!!!**

[PAUSE...]

So...on the most basic of institutional levels – membership, finances and facility -- this congregation has achieved remarkable and noteworthy success. And you should know that (in the denomination as a whole) we are known as a vibrant and outstanding and congregation...not the biggest, but one of the best (and most VIBRANT)! And this is why – frankly -- when it came time for us this year to find an interim minister to take us

forward, we were able to attract the interest of a number of highly qualified candidates, not the least of which was the Rev. Kaaren Anderson,

[PICTURE AND CAPTION OF REV. ANDERRSON IS PROJECTED UP ON THE SCREENS]



The Rev. Kaaren Anderson

the energetic, talented and experienced professional who will be joining you on August 1st to help guide you into the future. Now some congregations that face a ministerial transition are obliged – due to pre-existing problems or internal conflict – to use the interim period to “get their house in order.” But because we here at UUFVB are in such good and happy shape, you can take advantage of these two years with Kaaren to further the growth and stability we have accomplished thus far...and

initiate entirely new programs and projects we haven't even imagined yet!

[PICTURE OF REV. ANDERSON COMES DOWN OFF THE SCREENS]

So...in the overview...we have come a long way together over the last eleven toward greater institutional health and strength. But now I want to **“drill down”**...(as they say these days) and reflect on specific aspects of our shared life here at UUFVB.

First on my list is **MEMBERSHIP**. Let's begin with the numbers (which hardly tells you the full story of who we are and what we can accomplish for Unitarian Universalism...but it is a starting point, and an undeniable measure of congregational health).

[THE FOLLOWING MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

MEMBERSHIP

UUFVB membership in April 2010 – **180**

UUFVB membership today - July 2021 – **290**

Number of official “friends” of UUFVB – **150** (up from about 50 in 2010)

Number of people who have signed the membership book over this period – **304**

Number of member lost to death -- **79**

Number of members lost for other reasons (moved, lost interest, etc.) – **115**

Net gain in UUFVB membership over last 11 years -- **110**

Or a 60% overall growth rate

Now...I should note that this significant growth in our numbers here at UUFVB has occurred over a decade when American congregations as a whole (and UU congregations in particular) have suffered real membership losses. The truth is that most UU congregations these days are happy just to statistically “***hold their own***” against the broad-based declines in American religion...but happily we here in Vero are among a handful of UU congregations that are significantly growing.

And an important observation here: I believed the robust demographics of the Vero Beach area – with the housing boom and a rising influx of affluent retirees in their 60’s and 70s from the Northeast settling here (Indian river

county is currently growing at a nearly 10% rate) – should provide us with plenty of visitors and newcomers who can and will become members -- as long [crucial caveat here folks!] as long as we continue to be the warm and welcoming (and deeply spiritual) congregation we have become.

And let me pause here to say just a little bit more about us being a warm and welcoming congregation. As you have had heard me observe from this pulpit on several occasions, **Vero Beach is basically a COMMUNITY OF RETIRED ORPHANS.** Most people retire and move here (from more Northern climes) do so without much (if any!) family or community support. Most people arrive here knowing almost no one in this community. So when they walk in our doors (for the first time) looking for a spiritual community, they usually feel like orphans, like the only ones who are out of place and disconnected. But we (who all basically arrived here in the same way!) can extend a quick and warm welcome – inviting them to coffee hour, to join a covenant group or to participate in a circle dinner or social justice march -- hospitality that invites them to quickly become a part of everything we are. So...as you move forward as a congregation, remember that the only kind of spiritual community that

can grow here on the Treasure Coast is a truly/sincerely/actively warm and welcoming one! Over the last eleven years, we have done a good job of integrating new members and friends into our midst, and if Unitarian Universalism is to remain strong here, we must continue to be a sincere and profoundly welcoming congregation...**SO KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK!**

And let me just pause right here, dear friends -- while we are speaking of membership -- and acknowledge how much we dearly miss all those members and friends whom we have recently lost to death. I just wanted to take a couple of minutes right now to remember everyone who has died over the last eleven years of my ministry...to read their names out loud...even if many of these names will be unfamiliar to many. As I looked over this list, I realized how so many truly wonderful people we have had to say goodbye to...let's remember each and every one of them:

[SCOTT READS THE 79 NAMES]

Alright...so besides the all-important measures of membership growth and financial stability, what else have we accomplished together? Well, here (in one

sentence) is this morning's sermon "Take-Away" my dear friends.

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

It is my heart-felt conviction that over the last eleven years, we here at UUFVB have together nurtured and facilitated a true deepening and broadening of "The Spirit" across almost every important aspect of this congregation's life, including:

- **WORSHIP AND MUSIC**
- **FELLOWSHIP AND PASTORAL CARE**
- **LIFESPAN SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT AND ENRICHMENT**
- **STEWARDSHIP OF OUR BEAUTIFUL CAMPUS**
- **SOCIAL JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY SERVICE/OUTREACH**

WORSHIP AND MUSIC

Let me briefly address each of these institutional dimensions in turn...first **WORSHIP AND MUSIC** (which is so foundational to any religious congregation). I believe we have come a long way with making Sunday morning

truly inspiring and enriching for all who come here at 1590 27th avenue.

- First, we have come to fully utilize our exceptional audio/visual capabilities that came with this “evangelical” multi-media hard-wired building. We have instituted (and been enriched by) power-point slides, videos, and getting our noses out of the hymnals!
- Additionally, The Covid crisis (which was so terribly unwelcomed) forced us (nonetheless) to expand our worship in a “hybrid” format (offering both in-person worship and remote worship via the internet) that enables us to serve a much wider and more inclusive audience -- serving our many seasonal members, shut ins, distance participants including relatives of members, “seekers” and those who simply prefer to “come to church” from their living rooms, at their own time convenience.
- Our warm, informal and participatory liturgy (with – I pray to God -- regular moments of humor and fun) uplifts those who attend.
- The quality preaching provided by our many talented Affiliate Ministers: Carole York, Sarah, York, Crystal Bujol, John Brown, Chuck McNatt, Kenn Hurto and

Chuck Johns...thank you one and all! (And I hope that I too – at least some Sundays -- was able to bring similar energy and excellence to our pulpit 😊)

- Our developing music program (with the 4 wonderful professionals who have served us during my tenure-- Ann Hossler...Tom Mundy...Paula Herger and Elizabeth Borne – and a steadily growing/developing choir until Covid – SOON TO FULLY RECOVER!) A special note of thanks to Elizabeth Borne for so ably seeing us through this terribly difficult Covid period, when it was so challenging (for every American congregation) to provide quality music on Sunday...she has been innovative, dedicated, and flexible!...thank you Elizabeth!
- And I am pleased to report that we soon hope to have exciting news about a new Music Director to take us (and the choir) into the future.
- High quality/spiritual/thoughtful Worship is the hallmark of any healthy/vibrant/welcoming congregation...and dare I say we now know how to do it here at UUFVB!

[SCOTT REFERS BACK TO LIST UP ON CHANCEL SCREENS]

FELLOWSHIP AND PASTORAL CARE

Another crucial aspect of congregational life is the quality of our fellowship with one another and the pastoral care we provide our members and friends...how we humanly tend to one another within the confines of the congregation.

I'm happy to report that over recent years, our opportunities for fellowship and camaraderie have greatly expanded and deepened...WE LIKE TO GET TOGETHER TO ENJOY ONE ANOTHER'S GOOD COMPANY (across many events)...which is crucial for integrating new members and friends into the fold.

PASTORAL CARE: I am further happy to report we have a small and faithful "Pastoral Care team" that regularly meets with me and reaches out to members facing hardship and need...BUT THE TRUTH IS THAT 95% OF ALL PASTORAL CARE THAT HAPPENS HERE AT UUFVB HAPPENS INFORMALLY AND ORGANICALLY...THROUGH A THOUSAND ACTS OF SPONTNEOUS KINDNESS AND CARE. Numerous cards and notes sent...countless meals delivered and transportation provided...phone calls and visits made...covenant group members organizing care – all without anyone asking for such care. Yes, we need to

strengthen and expand our Pastoral Care team (perhaps a goal that can be achieved with the help of your Interim Minister Kaaren Anderson) but the truth is that pastoral care in a healthy/caring congregation is mostly an organic/informal thing that just arises out of the “Spirit” members and friends of the congregation feel...and I am very thankful that we have an abundance of that here at UUFVB...I pray that this spirit will continue to naturally grow and expand here at UUFVB.

LIFESPAN SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT AND ENRICHMENT

Another crucial area of congregational life is lifespan spiritual development and enrichment...and here again, we have (over recent years) seen an organic deepening and expanding of programming (and “spirit”).

First, there is the wonderful intergenerational and age-group work Kelly Stephens is accomplishing with our youth and families...she has faced systematic challenges and obstacles during the (safe-distancing requirements...with no Sunday, Sunday school possible) of the Covid Epidemic, but now that families are once again (slowly) returning to church, we should soon see a full resumption of activities, programs, and opportunities

for furthering our intergenerational religious/spiritual development.

Second, there is the excellent work of our renewed Adult Enrichment Committee. (Jen Sutton, Kristen Jolly, Pete Kersey really got us going again a few years ago after the death of Rosie Murphy...more recently helped by Patty Walker, Sue Burt, Ginger Heller, Steve Becker, and Dr. John Brown). A wide variety of in-depth spiritual/intellectual/educational workshops, courses and classes (with emphasis on the spiritual) have been offered, with a full slate of more opportunities slated for the coming year...stimulated by an overarching spiritual program **Soul Works** which your Interim Minister, Kaaren Anderson (and her Husband Rev. Scott Taylor) is bringing to UUFVB! STAY TUNED!

Third, there is the amazingly positive spiritual effect (on the congregation as a whole) of the COVENANT GROUP PROGRAM which we have enthusiastically adopted here at UUFVB over the last decade. Thanks to the enthusiastic leadership of Jen Sutton, Bonne Shelton, Pete Kersey (and the current Steering Committee Chair Patty Walker and others) this program has (at any given time) enriched the lives of something more than half of our members and friends. These small sharing groups

that promise to meet once a month have greatly increased “the quality of our fellowship” here at the fellowship – deepening personal relationships, spiritual exploration, pastoral care and community service. It is my fervent prayer that we continue to be one of the most active UU congregations across the continent with this beneficial program of spiritual sharing and exploration...and in just a matter of weeks we will again be signing people up for these groups for the coming year.

[SCOTT REFERS BACK TO LIST UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

STEWARDSHIP OF OUR BEAUTIFUL CAMPUS

And then there is the stewardship of our beautiful campus...our congregational home. Some of you may not realize that we here in Vero Beach are blessed with one of the most expansive, functional, and attractive church facilities in the entire UU movement. Built as a Christian mega-church, Our 35 year-old building has good bones, beautiful aesthetics (how about this spectacularly renovated Sanctuary!), is well maintained (thank you Al Parmentier and the hard working folks who serve on the Facilities Council) and has plenty of parking for large

congregational and community events. It serves us not as some **glitzy temple of our privilege and good luck**, but as an inspiring and practical home for us to do the important work of our religion in this community. This wonderful facility enables us to: 1) do everything we want to do for ourselves as a congregation within these four walls, AS WELL AS 2) create space (largely through the diverse programming of the *Emerson Center*...and the *Bridges Early Learning Center* providing pre-school education for more than 100 children) for our wider community to gather for education, service and entertainment. Because of its size and adaptability, we are uniquely blessed with a facility which allows us to play a larger (and more significant) role in the local community than most local congregations.

For all these reasons, it is vitally important for us to be wise and responsible stewards of this facility, this physical workshop of our Unitarian Universalism. We must care for this building like we care for and about our faith. Our building (and our work on behalf of our faith) are inextricably bound together...so let us promise to take care of both in perpetuity!

**SOCIAL JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY
SERVICE/OUTREACH**

And that leads me to the final dimension of our congregational work that I wish to highlight this morning...the all-important social justice (and community service) work we do here at UUFVB. If you look at the 7 guiding principles of Unitarian Universalism that are printed on the front of your order of service this morning, you will understand why service to the wider human community is absolutely essential for Unitarian Universalists. For more than 500 years, we have been a faith tradition committed to improving the human situation for all...working tirelessly (with others of good will) for human dignity, justice, equality, and hope. In fact, I would assert that it impossible for a congregation to call itself Unitarian Universalist unless it is fiercely committed to the hard and complicated (and perpetual!) work on behalf of dignity and justice for the human family. Over the last eleven years, building on the solid foundation that already existed here, we have together steadily expanded the social justice and community service work we do here at UUFVB. As you move forward as a Unitarian Universalist congregation here on the Treasure Coast, may you never forget that it is only by being AN OUTWARD LOOKING AND OUTWARD SERVING CONGREGATION that we can both thrive and

honor the holy demands of our faith. As we have together observed from this pulpit over recent months and years, right now our nation and world are greatly endangered by sinister forces of hate, division, injustice, ignorance, inequality and greed. Specifically...as I said recently to the leadership of the Reston, Virginia congregation whom I will be serving as interim minister for the next two years...right now our country and our culture is in grave danger of spinning completely out of control. There are racist and autocratic and anti-democratic and inhumane and violent forces at work that threaten the very survival of our society and social order. Now more than ever, we simply must re-double our efforts to embody and serve our highest human values...always keeping in the forefront of our consciousness both our first UU principle, THE INHERENT WORTH AND DIGNITY OF EVERY PERSON...and our duty to fight tirelessly near-and-far for social justice and human dignity. As I leave you, and your next minister arrives, you have your work on behalf of social justice cut out for you...as I do in Reston, Virginia where I am headed just outside the nation's capital. I pray with all my heart that the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach remains a beacon in this community for

social justice (and human service) in all its holy dimensions...let us prove ourselves equal to the great tasks on behalf of humanity that remain yet to be won.

[THE SLIDE THAT IS UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS COMES DOWN...AND SCOTT PAUSES]

CONCLUSION

So...to answer my own question this morning: ***“What Have We Accomplished Together?”*** I would dare to say we have accomplished MUCH to be proud of! Over the last eleven years as a minister and congregation we have grown in both SIZE and in SPIRIT! We have welcomed many new people to this good and caring congregation. We have paid off our mortgage and stabilized our finances...we have taken loving care of our useful facility...we have expanded our staff and programming...deepened our fellowship with one another (caring for one another in all the conditions of life)...grown in the ways of the spirit...fought for greater social justice while we have served those in the wider community in need. In other words:

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

As minister and congregation (over these last eleven years) we have succeeded in building a firm and faithful foundation for the demanding (yet ever joyful) religious journey that lies ahead.

And that is the key point for us to all remember this morning...**a holy journey lies ahead.** Our Unitarian Universalist faith is constantly calling us forward -- forward to building a better self...and forward to building a better community and world. As a congregation, we can never rest on (or be smugly satisfied with) whatever laurels we may have heretofore accomplished...or imagine ourselves as somehow having arrived at some sort of happy, final destination. As religious people, we must always have “a burning/holy dissatisfaction” with what is, and be ready to lend ourselves to the work of further humanizing both ourselves and our world. Both you and I are now moving on in our lives...but the religious challenge remains the same...**DEVOTING OUR LIVES TO THE GOOD AND HOLY WORK OF OUR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST FAITH.** May we – and this congregation -- be up to the task.

Amen.