

Open Hands, Warm Hearts: Our Nurturing Congregations

Keynote Address by the Rev. Calvin Dame
**2007 Annual Meeting of the
Unitarian Universalist District of Metropolitan New York
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Well, I am very pleased to be here today. I think most of you already know, I am Calvin O. Dame, and as I think most of you also know, I presently serve as the Congregational Services Consultant for the Unitarian Universalist District of Metropolitan New York. I was first introduced to the Metro District last year at the annual meeting here in Stamford, and I officially began working for you on July 1, 2006.

I come to the district with 23 years of experience in the parish, with 20 of those years serving one congregation in Augusta, Maine, and I have found that the years I spent immersed in parish life have been a pretty good preparation District work.

Other experiences have been helpful as well be.

- For a number of years I served as the good offices person with our Unitarian Universalist Minister's Chapter, and in that capacity, over the years I counseled colleagues on a wide variety of ministerial questions. I learned a lot during that time about what good Ministry is, what gets in the way of good Ministry what makes Ministry flourish, and what kind of Ministry helps a congregation to flourish.
- And during the time that I served in Augusta, we consolidated two smaller congregations into one larger and more vital congregation. And in that process I learned more than I can easily tell you about congregational cultures, about what good congregations look like and about what makes a congregation flourish!
- Also, before I arrived in the Metro District, I served for eight years on the UUA Board of Trustees. During that time I served as the chair of the UUA board's Committee On Committees. I was assured, when I was asked to serve on the committee that the name the Committee On Committees, would always be good for a bit of laughter with any Unitarian Universalist audience, and that has proven to be true. But the committee on committees is essentially a nominating committee, and my work over the years learning about the many facets of our association has been instructive. From finding volunteers to manage millions of dollars in investment to finding the right persons Fellowship Committee or the religious educators credentialing committee, or for the pamphlet commission or the right people to work on our antiracism and diversity initiatives, it all has been helpful to me in thinking about how committees and how organizations can flourish.
- And, as any of you in already know that during the time that I served as the minister of the Community Church in Augusta, Maine, that congregations was one of the first to adopt Small Group Ministry or Covenant Groups. As we got going in Augusta, people were curious about Small Group Ministry, so I wrote up our experience, other people read it, and the next

thing I knew I was a Small Group Ministry guru. In that capacity, I have worked with hundreds of congregations around the country and as far away as Paris, France. I've learned a lot, and that experience has been helpful.

- And I think it's important, before I done introducing myself here, to mention that for the 20 years that we've been living in Maine we've made maple syrup every spring. It turns out that sugaring, as it is called, is a not bad preparation for the work of a district consultant. At 40 gallons of sap for each gallon of syrup, it takes time and patience to make maple syrup. It takes a good while for anything to happen, and nothing happens without a bit of heat and fire. And, tapping trees and boiling maple syrup is a kind of farming, and from farming you learn that you are dependent on the land and the weather and a myriad of factors that lie beyond your control. Not unlike sugaring, ministry can be a whole a work, but in its essence it can be very, very sweet. District work is turning up the out to be very much the same.

It was just over a year ago that I met with a committee of the Metro District board for an interview, and was invited to become the interim Congregational services consultant for the Metro District. My original agreement a one-year engagement, but the Metro board has extended that agreement, so I will be with you for another 14 months.

So, let's talk about the district a bit. I agreed to be the speaker this morning in part to share some of my impressions thus far, and also as an opportunity to share some of the hopes and dreams that I have come to hold for our district.

Let me start with a simple, declarative sentence: The Unitarian Universalist District of Metropolitan New York is a great district!

- We have a wonderful variety of congregations;
- We have a rich and vibrant resource in the ministry and lay leadership throughout the district;
- We are enriched by the deeply rooted history of many of our congregations; we are enlivened by the vitality and energy of our newer congregations;
- We are made stronger by the generosity and the growing sense of connectedness among our societies that I have seen in the 10 months that I have been here.
- And speaking of the last ten months, it has not been a quiet time.
- I had not even unpacked my suitcase when I had a call from our congregation in Bridgehampton, letting me know that they had needed to obtain a Federal Injunction in order to carry signs in the Fourth of July parade to voice their opinions on the war in Iraq.
- I was still setting up my office, still trying to figure it out if it was Bayville on Long Island and Bay Shore in New Jersey, or the other way around, when I got a call saying that the Rock Tavern building had burned.
- And within weeks, as many of you know, my co-exec, Andrea Lerner, had a devastating house fire, as well.
- Then this last week the first Unitarian Society of what Westchester, Hastings-on-Hudson, were flooded from their building by 18 inches of water. They'll get back in, but they are meeting and worshiping in borrowed space for now.

War, fire, flood: Andrea and I are keeping our eyes on the lookout for locusts.

The generous response that the fire at Rock Tavern has elicited from the other Metro congregations has been just wonderful. It has been heartwarming and inspiring. And, the initial response to the flooding at Hastings on Hudson has been heartwarming as well. There is a sense of connectedness among our congregations that comes most visible in response to these traumatic events.

And the sense of connection with other congregations extends beyond the Metro borders. The most recent chalice lighters appeal for Gulf Coast relief had the most generous response of any chalice lighters request. What better testimony can there be to the connection and vitality of the district than the response to this appeal? I find it inspiring.

There is much activity in the district that is inspiring and encouraging:

- There are wonderful resources for religious educators to support one another and to deepen their training and professionalism.
- There are our programs for junior and senior high youth that not only connect our youth with like-minded friends, but serve as cornerstones for their faith development, too.
- There is an active antiracism and diversity committee which serves as a resource for the justice making efforts of our congregations.
- There is a Disaster Response Ministry that is dedicated and sophisticated, and, in this particular year, way too busy.
- There is an emerging Green congregation movement that is appearing in the district, which is very exciting
- And the Metropolitan District Annual Program Fund consistently comes in at very highest percentage of giving among the 20 districts that make up the UUA: a fact which speaks to both the generosity and the right relation!

I know that I will leave out something important here: the capable district board, the Young adult network, the President's Council, the strong minister's clusters, Laurie Golson, the district administrator and the responsive district office she maintains, the bustling and exciting district meeting. It would be impossible to list everything that is going on, even those of us who are working full time, can't keep up with everything. So much is going well!

Which is not to say that we couldn't be doing better. We could be.

Which is not to say that we do not fall a good distance short of our potential. We do.

Which is not to say that Andrea and I do not have ideas and dreams for the District that we have not yet achieved. We absolutely do! It is to say that there is a whole lot of health in the Metro New York District, there is a whole lot going on, there is much to celebrate.

Before I talk about new ideas, I want to reflect for just a bit about what a district is for. I know that the district board has spent considerable time exploring this as a part of the transition to Policy Governance.

The district board has worked hard, actually, over last couple of years, to define the ends which they understand the district is to serve. In policy governance in the board defines ends, which is to say, they define where the organization should be going, and the executive, or, in this case, the executive team, interpret the board's definitions and seeks to work towards those ends.

You can find all the language of ends and interpretations on the Metro website, but let me give you a quick version. Here's what the board said:

- that the Unitarian Universalist district of Metropolitan New York exists to be a source of connection and transformation for our congregations and our larger world
- so therefore, the District policies, resources, and actions will result in congregations that are effective, accessible, and diverse
- and, congregations that have empowered professional and lay leadership,
- as well as congregations that will cooperate and act together on areas of common concern,
- And, furthermore, district policies, resources, and actions will result in greater awareness and understanding in our congregations and our region of how Unitarian Universalist religion can transform lives, communities, the greater world.

That's a lot of words, excellent words, if you want my opinion, but way too many words to parse out in the context of this address.

My shorthand for this is simple: the district exists to help congregations succeed! That's it. A district exists to help congregations succeed.

Now, you can gussy that up. You could say for instance that a district exists to help congregations succeed beyond their wildest dreams, you could say that the district exists to help congregations have wild dreams. You could say that the district exists to help congregations have appropriate dreams, or to have dreams and all.

I wrote the other day. *“I think we all dream of congregations that can reach their full potential, congregations that are friendly to the stranger, supportive of their members, renewing for the participants; congregations that celebrate families, transform individuals, make a real difference in their communities!”*

Pretty much everything that I do is directed towards this end, helping congregations succeed. Whether it is talking with ministers about their work, consulting with lay leaders about their concerns, speaking with students for the Ministry, setting up trainings, sharing what I know about small group Ministry, tending the district assets, creating a district budget, attending board meetings, attending trainings for myself, speaking at an ordination, encouraging APF support, working with the chalice lighters, attending general assembly: every day I ask myself whether the choices that I make for my time will result in the near or the long term, in helping the congregations in the metro district grow towards vitality and health. Or, in the words of the district board, congregations that are healthy, effective, accessible and diverse.

Now, before I move on, let me just say this: I am an unabashed believer in the power and the potential of our faith and of our congregations. I believe that we have the potential to save lives and transform our communities, it is as simple as that.

I believe this because I have seen it. Over my years in the parish I watched as, year after year, individuals and families arrived on our doorstep,

- bedraggled, often,
- hurting often, sometimes confused,
- questioning, perhaps,
- hungry, hungry, hungry: hungry for connection and a sense of community.

Year after year, in my life in the parish, I have seen people arrive at our congregations hoping that they will find with us a sense of community and a place to explore questions of meaning and purpose. And I've seen people find that! I have watched:

- lives transformed,
- the bedraggled turned into an effective Congregational leader,
- the lonely find friendships. and community
- the questioning find a path towards meaning and commitment,
- children and youth establishing the foundation of a mature and sustaining faith through our religious education programs,
- the outraged (and we should all be outraged) find avenues for engagement and action.
- I've seen the lives of long time members supported and sustained, deepened and enriched, and yes, well, sometimes transform as well.

But oh people, sometimes it is so difficult and we are so inept.

Some times we are so inept at being religious communities; and the congregation that I served and loved for so long in Augusta, was no exception. It is always painful for me, knowing the potential that we have for:

- creating life sustaining and transforming community:
- for creating worship with the power to and supplier,
- creating religious education with the power to create,
- establishing programs with the power to transform,
- gathering communities with the power to make a difference in their communities,
- And knowing at the same time how easy it is to fall short:
- to settle for lackadaisical religious education,
- to get by with lackluster worship,
- to allow our buildings buildings to grow shabby,
- to settle for tired and entrenched leadership,
- to allow religious intolerance,
- to waste time in squabbles,
- to accept a lack of vision,

- to fumble around with inadequate resources,
- to find a disinterest in the stranger.

There's a hundred practices that congregations fall into that keep their health and vitality from breaking out all over the place.

Though of course, if everyone was doing it right there wouldn't be much work for the consultants, now would there!

We had an excellent consultant in the district this past fall, and it was his work that provided the theme for this annual meeting. In October the Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock hosted their First Annual Leadership Development Program, and they brought in the Reverend Dr. Larry Peers, a Unitarian Universalist minister who works now with the Alban Institute. He guided an excellent day of training for members of the Shelter Rock congregation and people from around the district. Some of you were there, I expect.

Working from a framework adapted from Richard Southern and Robert Norton, Dr. Peers laid out a framework through which to think about how congregations function what needs to be in place for a congregation to move towards vitality and health. The approach that he takes is to think about the congregations as a collection of systems which overlap but that can be separated out as a way to think about how congregations function, and where any particular congregation can put its attention in order to move forward.

Larry says that first of all there is a **Welcoming System**. Welcoming system is all the ways and all of the attitudes and all the practices that we have for welcoming the visitor more the stranger, from the moment they think about seeking out at congregation true their entry through the doors of the building to their welcome coffee hour to their assimilation into the ongoing life of the congregation. So that's the first system to think about, the welcoming system.

Now as it happens, last year's Annual Meeting had as its topic Radical Hospitality, so although we in the district did not yet have Larry Peers schematic to work with, in an important way last year's Annual Meeting theme addressed the welcoming system in congregations.

Larry's next system he calls the **Nurturing System**, and by this he means all that which nurtures the new life that has been introduced into the congregation as an organism and all that helps newcomers and ongoing members deepen their spiritual life, from support groups to classes and workshop to worship opportunities and small groups. The nurturing system in a congregation is all those parts of congregational life which engage newcomers and sustain members.

The nurturing systems are all those parts the life of a congregation which makes it feel like a place that is rich, warm, and full.

Rich, warm and full, if you take my meaning.

Well, the annual meeting last year did address itself to the question of hospitality and welcome, so the planning committee this year thought it would be a natural step to move right on to the

next system in the Larry Peers' schematic. So, the workshops that we offer today were all pretty much chosen to help congregations to think about being or becoming rich, warm, and full: to be rich with opportunities and possibilities, warm to the stranger and to the longtime member as well, and full of life affirming activities and projects.

Let me just mention the remaining three systems that Larry Peers identifies.

Larry talked about was the **Empowering System**, that is all those ways that congregation finds to help each person discovered his or her spiritual gifts and passions and grow into leadership; the way a congregation helps each person discover his or her gifts and passions, and encourages and make it possible for those gifts and passions to be put to use.

I do want to give anything away here, but I would keep an eye on this possibility the 2008 Annual Meeting.

The fourth system is the **Serving System**. Larry Peers writes that service to others is a powerful way for an individual to grow spiritually. Service is a way for servant leaders to emerge. A congregation must be attentive to providing support and recognition for individuals to grow by serving others -- using one's gifts talents and passion in meaningful and powerful ways.

And then finally, Larry Peers talks about **Community Presence**. What we do and say within our congregations and the ways that we serve others in the broader community extends our presence beyond our walls. Others come to know us by the way we live out our values and our purpose.

So, **Welcoming System, Nurturing System, Empowering System, Serving System** and **Community Presence** in brief this is the outline that Dr. Peers laid out for us for thinking about how congregations work. Now, they are a lot of ways to think about congregational life, I've seen many, but I must say that I've found the description of systems that Larry Peers to be helpful in thinking of ways to help congregationsto become effective, accessible, and diverse, to move towards vitality and health.

So here at this meeting we are talking about the nurturing system, all of the activities that are available to help people grow, to learn, to deepen their spiritual lives, to connect with one another, to worship together, to celebrate life! We offered a workshop on food, workshops on music, workshop on young adult, on Ministry with youth, workshops on worship, ond generosity, on social justice and art. All assembled with the nurturing congregation in mind.

The congregation that I served in Augusta, Maine is breaking ground this spring on the first phase of their new building. It has been 15 years in the planning. About 10 years ago, on the advice of our building consultant, we created a Five Year Plan as a part of the process towards moving us towards a new building. Now here's the thing, the Five Year Plan paid as much attention to the life of the congregation as it did to the mechanics of raising money and designing a building.

The reason for this the history of new construction in congregations and our denomination, as well as in other denominations are littered, quite literally, with empty new buildings. It is not

uncommon for congregations that need to build to become so focused on bricks and mortar and so concerned with raising money that they neglect the nurturing life of the congregation to such an extent that the congregation actually falls apart, evaporates almost, leaving a shiny new but empty building.

I am not making this up, it actually happens.

It was in this period of time that the Augusta congregation adapted Small Group Ministry modal from the evangelical churches, creating a vital program for the Augusta congregation, and helping to launch Small Group Ministry throughout the Association.

I don't have time enough to begin tell you everything I know Small Group Ministry, but for the purposes of this talk this morning let me just say that in a way the Augusta congregation launched Small Group Ministry in order to build a new building. This may seem odd, but we really understood that in order to take on the monumental task of erecting a new facility we had to make sure that our congregation had a creative and sustaining nurturing system in place.

Small Group Ministry is one of the best resources for sustaining a nurturing system, of creating a congregation where both new and old members have the possibility of coming together with one another in a way that leads toward spiritual growth and connects us into community.

In the time that I've been here in Metro, I have already had the opportunity to work with many of you in the district to share what I know about Small Group Ministry. I hope that by the time my sojourn with you is over I will have worked with everyone who wants to learn more about starting or strengthening Small Group Ministry programs in their congregations.

Rich, warm and full, now it is important to acknowledge here that there is a danger when a congregation turns its attention inward that the attention can become entirely inward and self-absorbed. In an individual that's called narcissism, of course. I'm not sure what it's called the congregation. Stuck, maybe; shallow, maybe; irrelevant, for sure. A congregation that's just there for itself is.... well.... a congregation that's just there for itself!

But what I know from my experience in Augusta, is that not only did turning our attention to small group Ministry help us to move along on the building projects, but it also ushered in a period of social engagement and service that was unprecedented in my experience with the congregation and as far as I know with any other period in the life of the congregation.

Here's the interesting paradox that emerged: as we learned how to nurture each other, we found ourselves more ready and better able to reach out in service to the world. Creating and nurturing system and a congregation is, paradoxically, a way to prepare for service and outreach to the world.

I am going to tell you now about a few things that are going on and Andrea and I would like you to know about, and a few things that we are dreaming about that think it's time to share with you. And then I want to share in closing what I think is the most important thing that I feel I have

learned so far in my year as a Congregational consultant, what I have come to believe is the crucial element in a healthy and vital congregation.

But first, what's going on.

Andrea and I are working with the staffs of the St. Lawrence District, the Ohio Meadville District and the Joseph P. Priestly District in a four district initiative that we are calling Shared District Ministry. We are building relationships and connections in such a way that we can begin to share services and expertise to the benefit of all the districts. Some districts have staff working with young adults or staff person growth, or leadership development. We may be able to bring them into the district's to do some training. I may be able to go to Small Group Ministry with another district. Andrea might be called on to give a boost to their religious education programming.

The first fruit of the For District Initiative is the Unitarian Universalist Leadership Team Institute that is going to take place at Juniata College in Huntingdon, Pennsylvania, July 28 through August 3. We are developing this in a partnership with Murray Grove, which is another exciting initiative! The week will include congregational development and growth, family ministries, governance, justice making, Small Group Ministry, as well as lifespan faith development, multiculturalism, shared leadership UU values in history. It promises to be, if I may say so, a rich warm and full experience. In the metro district is offering some financial incentive to support for congregations would like to send teams to leadership training Institute this summer.

One of the ongoing frustrations that Andrea and I encounter is the same one that many congregations share, and that there is not enough money to do all the things that we want to do. The income at the Metro District receives is just about enough to support personnel costs, and doesn't leave very much for programming.

However, and this is exciting, just this week, the Chalice Lighters Committee accepted a proposal from the district, with a contingency, to raise money to help the congregations in the district with older buildings to participate in a program called partners for sacred places. This is a nonprofit organization based in Philadelphia that works with congregations to revitalize their buildings in their place in the community. The New Dollars/New Dollars, Partners for Sacred Places can work with 10 to 12 of our congregations to carry out communitywide capital fundraising initiatives and help those congregations widen the circle of donors and partners to support the good care and active use of their buildings.

The Partners for Sacred Places have worked with Unitarian Universalist congregations from Florida to California to New Hampshire and Maine, earning high praise and enthusiastic endorsements. Andrea and I think this could be a source of great vitality and energy for a number of our congregations.

The contingency that the Chalice Lighters Committee has put on their endorsement is that we find, by July 15, at least six congregations that are ready to commit to this effort. Members of those congregations will fulfill the role of ambassadors in visits to other congregations, which are such an effective part of the Chalice Lighters process in the Metro District. There is

information on Partners for Sacred Places in the display area, and if you think this is the right program for your congregation, please talk with me right away!

Some other ideas that are percolating:

Leaders from the Long Island congregations met in March to explore that they might work together for the common good. A few ideas emerged, including a UU jamboree. One idea that is moving forward is a Lay Leadership Training Course which will take place over a number of Saturday's next year. A planning group will be made in meeting a couple of weeks, and we hope to create some synergy with the Shelter Rock's second annual leadership training event on October 6.

Also, I have been talking with Alice Mann, an Alban Institute consultant, who literally wrote the book on church size transitions. If we can locate more funding, I would like to have Alice come into the district to work with the congregations that are struggling with the pastoral to program size, transition. Alice is particularly gifted at helping congregations that are ready to grow to understand the dynamics that hold them back or that can move forward.

These are several of the exciting initiatives that are underway in the Metro District.

So, I would like to wrap this up this keynote address with this one particular observation. I'm not sure that what I have to say is an entirely new idea for me this year, I think that I've understood it to some degree for a long time. And, when I step back a bit, sort of hold the idea at a distance, it sort of seems mundane. Still, over the last few months this perception has come to seem to me to be the bedrock of health in our congregations.

Here it is: when it comes to the health and vitality of a congregation, everything begins and ends in **vision**.

See, it doesn't sound that startling. It's not original, it's not new, I know. "Without vision, the people perish." Somebody said that. It's pretty simple, I know.

But be that as it may, this is what I've had impressed upon me in the time that I've been in the district, and I think, in fact, it's the key to the vitality of our congregations. If you want to be a healthy and vital congregation, you need to start with vision.

Congregations that have a vision of who they are and what they are doing and where they are going that is worthy of their time, find that they have no problems. What they encounter are challenges, and congregations with the clear vision of what they are going just go ahead and development develop plans to meet their challenges. The challenges are merely speed bumps in the road.

But for congregations that do not have a clear sense of who they are and what they are up to and where they're going, congregations that do not have a vision that is worthy of them and worthy of tradition in which we all participate, those congregations tend experience their challenges not as speed bumps in the road but as roadblocks. It seems like everything and anything can bring them to a halt, take the spirit out of them, keep them from moving forward.

Earlier I spoke about what I believe about our faith; I still believe it. I believe in Unitarian Universalism.

- I believe in our congregations,
- I believe that we have the power to transform human lives.
- I believe that we have the power to create communities of meaning and purpose.
- I believe that we have the capacity to bear witness to injustice, to raise our voices on immigration, on the war, on civil liberties, on racism and multiculturalism, on women's rights and workers rights.
- I believe that we have the power to transform our communities, often merely by asking the questions that need to be asked in such a way that we can help to change the public discourse.

And you know, it has been my experience that the congregations that catch a glimpse of this, the congregations that hold a vision of who they are and what they can be and of the importance of the work that we are called to do as people of faith, as Unitarian Universalists, those congregations spend less of their time worrying about the color of paint in the bathrooms or the vocabulary in the hymnals, and more of their time turning problems into opportunities.

And so may it be with our congregations.

And so may it be with the Metro NY District.

And so may it be with us all.