



# THE DAWNING FUTURE OF UU

A panel discussion launching the next 150 years of  
The First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor

**Saturday, May 16, 2015, 2:00 pm, Phifer Sanctuary, [uuaa.org/150](http://uuaa.org/150)**

**Panelists:** Rev. Tom Schade (moderator), Rev. Sue Phillips, Dr. Glen Thomas Rideout, , Rev. Meg Riley, Rev. Tandi Rogers, Rev. Don Southworth, Rev. Leslie Takahashi

Each panelist was asked to submit a short essay ahead of the panel discussion. The essays are presented below.

## Rev. Tom Schade (panel moderator)

My attitude toward “Contemporary Organized Religion” is like Gandhi’s thoughts on Western Civilization: “It would be a good idea.”

I am a child of the church; my family on both sides was filled with ministers in the German Baptist tradition. My father was a Unitarian minister for most of my early childhood, and I grew up in the First Unitarian Church of Youngstown, Ohio.

I am a religious person, albeit of uncertain faith and average character. Nonetheless, I love the church, and I think that it one of the institutions that will lead the way toward social transformation.

But church as we know it, whether we call it “church” or “congregation”, is in trouble, and will not survive in its present form. Most churches in the United States are organized in a model that is nearly 100 years old. Most churches are now led by aging Baby Boomers who only recently replaced their elders in leadership. As institutions, most churches, and especially liberal churches, lag far behind in the use of modern communications technology. Almost every congregation faces a long-term and chronic financial shortfall. Few have the resources to do more than keep the doors open, meet the payroll, and repeat last year’s programming.

If there was ever an institution that needed a thorough-going, top to bottom, shake-up, it would be organized religion. And while Unitarian Universalism has kept its theology up to date, institutionally, it is just a stuck in the past as the rest of the Protestant mainline, from which we come.

Tony Blair, the former Prime Minister of Great Britain, and an active churchgoer, once said that the reason why the Church of England resisted change was that it still hoped that if the people ever came back to church, they would find it familiar, just like it was when they stopped going. A bleak vision of future possibilities, if you ask me.

But the best thing about a bleak future is that it hasn't happened yet. Innovation and change are possible and on the horizon, but we have to turn ourselves toward them. What better time than now, on our 150th birthday, to start to imagine new directions, new methods and new visions for ourselves.

We have gathered a panel of some of the most innovative people in the Unitarian Universalist Association: people who have moved UU organizations in a new way, people who seen the wide variety of experiments going around the country, people who developed new ways of financing ministry, people who have used new technology like the internet and ancient human arts, like the human voice, to create new forms of ministry, people who have witnessed our struggle to wake up to the multicultural world we have always lived in.

Our hope is that their experience and wisdom will spark our creativity here in Ann Arbor, and point us toward the innovation we will need to thrive in the next 150 years.

### Rev. Meg A. Riley, Senior Minister of the Church of the Larger Fellowship

There is a lot of talk about the end of the brick and mortar church. That's the world I've lived in since 2010, when I became the Senior Minister of the Church of the Larger Fellowship (CLF). CLF is the largest congregation in the UUA—about 3600 people. We have no mortgage, no building and grounds committee, no building use policy, no rentals and no building. What we do have is the mission to find, inspire and include religious liberals in all sorts of life situations, from isolated rural communities, to universities and prisons. As you might expect, we do much of our ministry online. We offer worship, religious education, webinars, and pastoral care through online channels. (See [www.QuestforMeaning.org](http://www.QuestforMeaning.org) or [www.DailyCompass.org](http://www.DailyCompass.org), or our Youtube channel or Facebook page!)

After four years of engagement in this online ministry, it has never been clearer to me how much we need face to face, heart to heart, hand to hand connections. The internet, alone, is anemic and leads to something akin to 'trout starvation'—where old fishermen had plenty of

trout to eat but starved to death because they just got the same nutrients over and over and needed more. Your congregation in Ann Arbor has 150 years of successfully feeding people balanced meals. But your reach is limited to those who can get to your building. How could you expand your ministry, augmenting it with online community that is there for people during sleepless nights, hospital stays, long trips? How could the internet help you to offer your gifts to a world which needs them badly?

The best ministry will be a blend of online and offline—a world evangelicals have created, but Unitarian Universalists are just beginning to imagine. What could you imagine?



Rev. Sue Phillips, Massachusetts Bay/ Clara Barton District Executive of the UUA, Faithify Founder

Crowdfunding as Sacred Text for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor Rev. Sue Phillips

FAITHIFY – the first ever denominationally-affiliated crowdfunding site – has succeeded by every measure. In the first eight months, twelve hundred donors pledged \$160,000 to 40 Unitarian Universalist ministry projects. We’ve had more than 20,000 unique visits in the last four months alone.

But the truth is **FAITHIFY** is not about crowdfunding at all. It’s about expanding imagination.

By intensifying imagination for Unitarian Universalism, **FAITHIFY**’s true mission is to help manifest a future that would not otherwise be possible. Exposure to other people’s good ideas gives people something to riff off of – a fresh starting place to spark thinking that would never otherwise have arisen. Creativity is the love child of imagination, inspiration, and reason. **FAITHIFY** is a matchmaker.

Meanwhile, it turns out that the “crowd” of crowdfunding is pretty much a fallacy. Even super popular ventures like **Kickstarter** and **Kiva** rely on an alchemy of inspiration, trendiness, and base commerce to drive traffic to their sites. When we started **FAITHIFY** we thought people would be so psyched to have a fancy UU crowdfunding site that all 600,000 of us would come running over for a visit.

But there is no crowd, only individuals who are invited to engage something someone they care about cares about. The “crowd” doesn’t know each other and never will. Infinitely more complex webs with looser bonds are emerging as people link together in dynamic networks of relationships. The hub and spoke model of connection manifested by congregations everywhere is fading.

The enormous generative potential of this reality is the key to FAITHIFY’s kingdom, and I believe to yours in Ann Arbor. The implications of FAITHIFY for your congregation are not about income diversification. They are about how and why people connect to each other in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and how we can help our beloved faith flourish in our emergent networked world.

FAITHIFY is a mirror. The patterns of connection to which the site responds and that fuel FAITHIFY’s potential are everywhere evident in Ann Arbor too.

People do not just stumble upon FAITHIFY. Some folks might see our ads in the UU World, walk over to their computer and fire it up, but these are rare birds. The people who visit our site were invited there, maybe even begged to go, by people they care about. They come because of a personal connection that may or may not be coupled with a commitment to Unitarian Universalism. I’m not convinced that commitment to Unitarian Universalism on its own drives very many people to our site. That said, with our becalmed logo and covenantal language FAITHIFY looks familiar to every UU. They have a sense that it is a space curated by their faith and thus they trust it – at least enough to hand over their credit card number.

Getting people to visit the site is a huge hurdle, but arriving at the site and engaging it are two very different things. FAITHIFY’s mission to expand people’s imagination means we try hard to get visitors to delve deeper into what they encounter on the site. We give visitors a few very easy ways to participate, and it works – people have shared FAITHIFY projects via social media a remarkable 10,000 times.

But FAITHIFY’s most treasured prize is the most intangible. Our true currency is not the vaunted social media share or even dollars raised, but the inspired imagination, expansion of possibility, and desire for deeper connection. Our currency is people claiming and being claimed by their faith.

As you think about how to develop innovative ministries for the future, realize that you must drive people to your site. Articulate compelling reasons to engage – a personal invitation from someone they care about, confidence they will recognize what they find, reflections of values they already hold. Lower the wall between you and your crowd so all folks have to do is take a tiny step across the threshold, and then give them easy ways to go deeper. Your congregation’s future will depend not on the number of members or people who come to the building for worship, but your success as a faithful, replenishing, transforming platform for loosely-connected people in their networked lives.

### **Your Packing List**

As an employee of our Association I travel a lot. I think about packing for trips constantly. What will I need? What don't I need? I make lists to help me remember.

You, the First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor are going on a trip of sorts, aren't you? Heading into a new era, the next 150 years. I started a Packing List for you. And an Unpacking List, as we're going to need some room.

First you need to pick out your carrying case. Will your old one do or do you need something updated and easier to transport? You know what? Wait until you've settled on what you're taking and then decide if it fits your mission.

### **Unpacking List**

1. "Should" - Get rid of the tyranny of the "should." Should squashes joy and creativity, which will be needed in abundance where you're going.
2. "We've always done it that way." – I don't think I need to say more about that, do I?
3. Certitude and Fundamentalism – Yes, UUs have our own brand of fundamentalism and it drives people away from us.

### **Packing list**

1. Authenticity – Who are you at your core? When do you feel most naturally Unitarian Universalist? Do and be that.
2. Play, wonder, and relational curiosity – the antidote for certitude and dullness.
3. Permission giving to experiment – That is the only way I know to invite fresh ideas and leadership and those are the only way I know how to keep on moving forward.
4. Forgiveness – because mistakes will be made. If there are no mistakes, then you're not stretching enough.
5. Covenant – it was already in there, but it just needs a dust-off.
6. Radical interdependence – also known as our congregational polity. It's already in there, too, but needs to soak a bit in fresh water to perk it back up.
7. Relationship – You already have some in your bag, Throw in a jumbo-pack. Look on the ingredients listing and be sure "love," "networking," and "beyond walls" are there in ample proportion.
8. Courage – Do you have any courage from the luggage of your ancestors somewhere in the attic that you can pilfer? That's the kind of courage I'm talking about. The kind of courage that comes with sacrifice born out of love for a generation you've not met yet.

Are you getting excited to take off? I'll meet you at the boarding gate.

The world needs churches that know how to build and strengthen communities. The world needs churches to model what it means to enter the worlds of others with respect and curiosity. The world needs churches that know the power of joined voices of all ages, and races, and means, sounding in common purpose. And it needs churches to assure that the hope for a world at peace will never die. The world needs churches that will sing.

Implicit in the sound of a singing congregation is a persistent truth—only *we* can make this sound. I cannot make the sound of the congregation's voice by myself; no *one* of us can. Still, without each of us, the sound does not exist. With every note, singing together reminds that there is power in our acts of interdependence, that what we achieve together can be beautiful and strong.

We sing together to engage and learn the words of others's faiths. We invite songs of great joy and of deep despondence. Our worship services stand Bach's chorale with Hogan's spiritual, and Swahili with English, ancient songs with ones barely born. We learn to approach each melody with humble curiosity and to meet every song with dignity and growing grace. Community singing assures these kinds of conversations are accessible to virtually any person of any race, age, gender, culture, religion, income, vocation, in any corner of the world. In this mode, our singing operates a powerful gateway through which we explore the countless cultures, lives, and perspectives that form our world.

We sing to be in touch with the ancestors of our religion, the ancient foundations upon which we draw new conclusions and build spiritual community in the present moment. Singing together harnesses the challenge of Marion Franklin Ham's *As Tranquil Streams (SLT 145)*—to “revere the past [while trusting] the dawning future.”

Songs are a vessel for the expression of our untempered hope. Notice how “we shall overcome” has never been changed to “we might...” I've yet to see the text “deep in my heart I do believe,” scaled down on a day when the people are discouraged. This is because our church's songs preserve our dreams in their purest form. They welcome singers to embody our deepest aspirations together and be reminded of their beauty.

Singing sees a planet where faiths commune rather than collide. It teaches that the potential for beauty is inherent in every human interaction. And it envisions a land where voices need not clamor to be heard; they need only learn to sound together. Singing asks us to hear each other more deeply, to find the founts of wisdom that speak from within our differences. Singing reminds communities to value and hone its people's creative minds, because it knows the innovations that heal broken worlds live in the communion of intellect and inspiration.

The teachings available through the practice of building a community's voice are more relevant now than ever to the work of our congregations. The contemporary religious community would

do well to harness this vital strategic resource, and inspire voices that will ring out bold songs of justice, peace, and cooperation for the world to hear.

### Rev. Don Southworth, Executive Director of the UU Ministers Association

How will we fund brick and mortar congregations in the future? The formula for producing income in Unitarian Universalist congregations has not changed much in generations. Have as many members as possible, encourage them to be as generous as possible through their pledges, throw in some dollars from building rentals, perhaps a religious education program fee or two and maybe add some annual income from an endowment fund. Throw in some spiritual magic and you will be able to fund a competent, outstanding staff who is able to meet the worship, programmatic and pastoral needs of the congregation while making sure to practice fair share compensation for the staff, be a fair share giver to the UUA and ensure the building and grounds are taken care of so that they can last.

In an era when congregation expenses continue to rise (salaries, benefits, maintenance), membership is flat to declining, incomes are being squeezed and changing generational values toward institutions and giving are happening the future of congregational budgets looks bleak.

So what are we to do? Look to a future with smaller staffs comprised of part-time employees or people who are making less than fair compensation? The number one question every congregation should be asking themselves and their membership is where/how are we going to get at least 10% of our income outside our membership in the future? Too often board and congregations are fighting the year to year battle of the budget, focusing on the same formula that leads to frustration and disappointment.

The time has come for congregations to become more intra- and entrepreneurial and look for new ways to develop income streams for today and in the future. Perhaps a congregation will start a new business or service for the community, maybe they'll start offering religious education and programming for non-members on-line or in community centers, the opportunities are plentiful. The challenge is to start thinking outside of the box and asking new questions about how to create funding streams for the future.

*The Rev. Don Southworth is the founding Executive Director of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association and is dealing with the same question he's raising for the panel conversation. He served as a parish minister for ten years in three different size congregations (pastoral, program and large) after spending twenty years in sales, marketing, management and training in the corporate world. He has taught growth and stewardship classes in the United States and England and is the co-founder of the Beyond the Call: Entrepreneurial Ministry program.*

Let me begin by confessing that I am an etymological geek. I love to learn about words and treat my worn copy of Partridges' Etymological Dictionary as a scriptural text. Through learning the origins, we can understand better the human journey that gives rise to the language. The word "religion" means "to bind together." And so the first question I would pose it how will we be bound together in the years to come? And the second would be how we, in our living tradition, will adapt to the emerged world we already inhabit.

We are in a time of waking among worlds. Some of us live in a world of constancy and shared values. Others dance through a world of instant gratification. And both are reduced by technology and global greed whose horrors are brought to us in countless little screens throughout our lives until the temptation is to use those same screens to turn away into entertainment ethic and bottomless consumption. We are confronted by one another's differences in a world in which multiculturalism is no longer exotic but commonplace. In the world already emerged for some, we have infinite ways to skim meaning and connection off the surface of our lives. In this new world which many of us are already inhabiting, what we lack is the ability to have the deeper dive—to immerse ourselves and be bound to the sustaining commitments within the family of humanity and to the larger family of all being. To talk across difference and to learn to hold multiple truths.

In these times, we need to ask how our congregations can be the places which add value. Which allow us to test whether what we profess has legs in day-to-day commitments about how we are together and how we are in the wider world. How can we practice living in ways which accentuate the possibility not only of human connection but real, tangible connections with the other beings with which we share the world?

This deep dive needs to create space within our own over-committed lives and the constant titillation of new experience. We also need to push back at the surface to keep from being marred by the insidious oil slicks of consumerist culture and an increased sense of ennui and apathy which belies our Universalist ancestors' ideas that we can create heaven on this one and precious earth. We need the stamina and the fortitude to push hard against the boulder of indifference and to look squarely at the hardest issues which face us in a world of immense beauty and fragility, the world our Unitarian forebears saw as One.

This is the deep dive, not of the future, of this moment. Now.

Our living tradition walks towards the paradoxical truths to which we are called to be bound—a religion that walks between worlds, dives deeper, binding us to timeless and emerging truths.