

Building Sanctuary
Where Does Our Faith Begin and Where Does it End?
By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
March 6, 16

In 1939, near the end of the Great Depression and the start of WWII, nearly a thousand Jewish German citizens, hoping to escape the Third Reich, climbed aboard the *St. Louis*, a transatlantic liner, headed for the US. Most had already applied for US visas and obtained the proper landing papers for Cuba, where they intended to stay until their visas were approved. But they didn't know that just before they'd departed, the Cuban President had invalidated all recently issued landing certificates. So when the ship finally arrived the desperate refugees weren't allowed to disembark, largely because the Depression had made work scarce in Cuba and its citizens were resentful toward foreigners, especially Jews, whom they blamed for taking their jobs.

After negotiations failed, the *St. Louis* had no choice but to make its way back to Germany, passing close enough to Florida for its passengers to see Miami's lights. Although the story made national headlines and the US government was aware of the situation, the number of German immigrants the law allowed each year, less than 28,000, had already been reached in the States. Under the circumstances, President Roosevelt could have used his Executive powers to permit the refugees in anyway, but he was seeking reelection in a nation where high unemployment had also led to xenophobia, isolationism, and tremendous hostilities toward immigrants, especially Jews. Around the same time, for instance, both legislative Houses killed a bill that would have allowed 20,000 additional German Jewish children to enter the US.

Fortunately, during the return journey, other nations took in almost half the asylum seekers, although 620 passengers, in all, were still returned to countries in Western Europe that would soon be overrun by Nazis anyway. Some of them found other means of escape, but more than half the passengers aboard the *St. Louis* had to endure the horrors that followed, and nearly half of those didn't survive the Holocaust. Anti-Semitism and anti immigration, in general, was rampant round the world, including here in the United States, the sweet land of liberty, that, on the one hand, welcomed the world's tired, poor, huddled masses yearning to be free, and, on the other, turned them away in droves, condemning them, through callous inaction, to cruelty, suffering, and death.

59 years after these events, among the most diabolical in human history, the Vatican, under the leadership of Pope John Paul II, issued an apology for failing to speak out against the holocaust when it was happening, which raises the question I want us to consider today, the question the people of any church, of every church, must consider today; *Where is our church located?* Is it here, confined within these walls, on a corner lot in Spokane, Washington? We often say, "we go to church," but is church really just a place with an address we go to, or is it a people who go out to address injustice,

inequality, and violence everywhere? Are we bound by property lines, or are we bound to cross the lines of color, class, nationality, religion, gender, gender identity, sexuality, even species, and all else that distinguishes us from others? Is church something that happens for an hour on Sundays, or is about what we do with that hour after it ends? Must those seeking sanctuary come here, to us, or is the safety of sanctuary something we should help build everywhere? Must they, like those aboard the ill-fated *St Louis*, risk coming to us only to be turned away because there's not enough room, not enough jobs, not enough tolerance, kindness, or compassion? Or must we risk reaching out in new and creative ways, beyond our comfort zones, outside our boxes, blurring the boundaries between "us" and "them" until there is no longer an "us" and "them?"

The beautiful sanctuary we're now in, which will be paid for by the end of the year, was constructed in 1994, 22 years ago. But our church has been in this community since 1887, almost 130 years. During the more than one-and-a-quarter centuries since its establishment, our church has dwelt in what was once the Spokane Opera House, then a 275-seat meetinghouse at the corner of Jefferson and Sprague, then the Clemmer Theatre (now the Bing), then in borrowed, eventually donated space from Temple Emanu-El, and finally in the Glover Mansion before our move here. There was even a long period of "homelessness," during which our members had no place of their own and had to meet wherever they could, from "pillar to post," as they said back then.

Clearly, in light of all this, our church is far more than a location, than a place we go to. Certainly every community must gather to commune, which our church has found novel ways of doing in many different locations for 130 years. Sometimes we meet here, in this wonderful building we are so fortunate to have. But sometimes we meet in the streets, marching, gay and straight together, in Pride Parades in solidarity with our GBLTQ friends, family, selves, and neighbors. Sometimes we meet standing outside the Federal Building, demonstrating for economic justice; or in front of City Hall demanding equality and justice for Latino children and their families. Sometimes we meet to while hosting and attending forums on criminal justice reform, or showing up in support of Smart Justice practices in our community. Sometimes we're in Olympia calling for an end to Capital Punishment in our State. Sometimes we're on Netflix in a documentary about legalizing marijuana and bringing an end to the unjust Drug War. Sometimes we're giving public testimony at a hearing on the coal and oil trains coming through our community; or at a City Council Meeting to advocate for workers rights. Sometimes we're chanting at a Black Lives Matter march, or organizing a local rally against Climate Change. Sometimes we're in our work places, our schools, with our friends, and even stuck in heavy traffic doing our best to model our Unitarian Universalist values.

Just this past week, for example, I had five separate meetings with five of our City Council members to discuss the impact of Global Warming in our community and what we can do about it, especially regarding the transport of fossil fuels through town. I told them that in the Unitarian Universalist tradition a minister isn't just the

pastor of those who attend church on Sundays, but is a pastor to the entire community in which she or he lives. As a Unitarian Universalist pastor I must remain attentive to the needs of my entire community and am, therefore, gravely concerned when we have weeks of scorching, record breaking heat two summers in a row; as well as mild winters and light snow packs, threatening the water supply we depend upon for drinking and providing us with clean, carbon free hydro-energy. As a Unitarian Universalist pastor I'm concerned about weeks of smoke filled air, as well as the loss of life and destruction of forests and property from an unprecedented fire season. As a Unitarian Universalist pastor I worry about the increased volume of trains coming through Spokane. I worry about their carcinogenic fumes giving rise to increased respiratory illnesses in children and causing higher cancer rates for us all. And I worry about the possibility of derailment and the need for mass evacuations in a City that doesn't have the equipment or ability to respond to such a disaster.

I also worry about new jail proposals in an era of mass incarceration that unjustly targets my African American brothers and sisters, especially in a city that already spends nearly 75 cents of every tax dollar on criminal justice. I worry about proposed ordinances that would allow all City Employees the right to target our Latino brothers and sisters by demanding to see their proof of citizenship. I worry about members of the Spokane Tribe, too many of whom continue to live in poverty even as my home, as well as our church building, dwell upon the land that is their rightful inheritance. As a Unitarian Universalist pastor, the needs and concerns of my greater community weigh heavy on my shoulders because I know our church is not just a place within these walls at this address.

Some of you know, for example, several years ago, after the fall of the Eastern Blockade, American Unitarians were able, after decades, to reestablish relations with Unitarians in Eastern Europe. That's when our church began what is now a 25-year partnership with the Unitarian church in Felsorakos, Romania, formally part of Transylvania, where Unitarianism began. One of the first things they asked our help with was the purchase of a new tractor. Now, if this is new information to you, you might be wondering what the heck does a church need with a tractor? They needed it because the church is considered part of the entire community. In fact, if you go to a church service there these days, you'd be fortunate to see more than 25 people attending, though the church claims to have over 900 members. This is so because they consider most everyone in their village to be part of the church. It's not just a Unitarian church; it's a Unitarian village. So when their minister, Rev. Jozsef, asked for our help obtaining a tractor, it wasn't for bush-hogging the churchyard, but so the farmers in the village could till their land and grow their crops.

So this pastoral mindset is part of our oldest tradition; that our church and its ministry belong to the entire community. Again, as a Unitarian Universalist minister, this is part of my mindset too, and, I know, part of the mindset of our entire congregation. This is why we pledge and contribute to this church, to sustain this community and our mission to the larger world. This is why, when our Sikh neighbors are threatened with violence we link our arms around their temple and surround

them with our love, and why, when their most sacred place of worship is violated and vandalized, we give them our entire Sunday collection, because they are us, part of our village. It's why we march in the streets, and demonstrate on sidewalks, and collect signatures in front of grocery stores, and testify before our City Council, and partner with the Peace Justice Action League, the Spokane Alliance, Planned Parenthood, the NAACP, the Lummi Nation, Move to Amend, the Sierra Club, The National Alliance on Mental Illness, Meals on Wheels, Transitions, Spokane Aids Network, the West Central Community Center, the Spokane Tribal College, Bite to Go, the Center for Justice, Balboa Elementary school, and so many other worthy organizations advocating for peace and justice in our village.

As important as all of this is, our church is greater still than even this one city. It's larger than Washington State, and even more than just the United States. The modern era, with all its technology, has helped make the world smaller and our community so much bigger. It is now possible for us to extend our reach to some of the farthest corners of the world, and for people far away to reach out to us. As some of you have already heard, for instance, a couple weeks ago we received a check for almost \$80,000 from the estate of Dolores Beebe. Dolores was a Unitarian living in New Jersey, had few surviving relatives, and, to our knowledge, had no connection to anyone in our congregation. So we don't know why she chose to include us so generously in her will. We're not sure how she knew of our ministry and came to believe so profoundly in the work we are doing, and there's no one for us to ask. But we can be pretty confident the Internet was involved, that even though we didn't know it, Dolores was with us, observing us, inspired by us. And this is why we have invested in technology that gives us the ability to live-stream our services to the world, and soon to even engage with people far away from time to time, because we understand we part of a global village and that our sanctuary must extend far beyond just these walls.

This year, thanks to your generosity, we will, for the first time in a very long time, be able to give our fair share contribution to the Unitarian Universalist Association in order to support the work of our faith round the world, including places like Nicaragua where we are working to help establish fair trade and environmental justice; or in Mexico where we are working to help desperate immigrants, including leaving water in the desert so those seeking refuge don't die of thirst along the way; and in Haiti where we are working to not only to help in the recovery effort after the devastating earthquake there 3 years ago, but also to move beyond recovery by establishing sustainable ego villages; and even here in our own State, where Unitarian Universalists from all over the country are working in solidarity with the Lummi Nation to help protect their land, air, and water from the impacts of climate change. In addition to all this, our denomination, to give only the partial laundry list, is advocating to increase the national minimum wage and for socially responsible investing, including have divested its own interests from the fossil fuel industry; we're part of the Sanctuary Cities movement, helping to provide sanctuary to immigrants desperate to create a better life, while fighting to end deportations; we're continuing to advocate for LGBTQ rights in the US and around the world; we're active

in the Black Live Matter movement, working to put an end to racial profiling and to the era of mass incarceration; we're teaching age appropriate sex ed classes to kids, and advocating for birth control and reproductive justice for women everywhere; and we're actively fighting to overturn draconian voter suppression laws—to name just a little of all we're up to.

So where exactly is our church located? Sixty years ago scientist, priest, and mystic, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin suggested we need to grasp that ours is “a world that is *being born* instead of a world that *is*.”¹ Chardin also talked about the “Planetisation” of humanity, in which we come to realize we are all converging toward wholeness. I think the same is true of our church, that we have become part of a global community without boundaries, and that our ministry must exist beyond borders. As I said a few moments ago, the sanctuary we're in today was completed in 1994 and will be paid off at the end of this year, but ours is a sanctuary that is still *being built* not a sanctuary that *is*.

This may be something much of the world and the people of many churches still need to realize, but it has always been true of Unitarian Universalism. The chalice we light each Sunday morning, as a symbol of our faith, began in 1940 when the Unitarian Service Committee used it as a clandestine symbol to assure suspicious, frightened Jewish refugees hoping to flee Nazi Germany, that they were among friends who could help them escape. Thus, the symbol of our faith symbolizes our long realization that we are part of a global community, and that we must reach out wherever injustice occurs. Ours is a faith, I am proud to say, that has not had to apologize for abandoning the Jews or for saying nothing during the Holocaust. We not only said something, we did something.

Today, there are still refugees seeking sanctuary, and, as part of a global village, we must do what we can to minister to them all, because ours is not a church that *is*, but a church that *is becoming*, a church that continues to build sanctuary. So *where is our church located?* It's located in Ferguson, Missouri and New York City and Chicago, Illinois, and anywhere else African Americans are being murdered in the streets by cops. It's in prison where people of color have been locked away in grave disproportion to whites. It's on a boat full of Syrian refugees hoping against hope to find asylum from their war torn country. It's in a mosque that has been desecrated by hate, or a Sikh temple vandalized by a disturbed individual. It's at an outdoor wedding between two men, or two women. It's in the desert leaving water for refugees, and at the southern border offering solace and support to frightened immigrants. It's as far away as a tractor in Felsorakos, Romania, and as nearby as our local Planned Parenthood Office. Our church is in so many places, it'd almost be easier to ask where our church isn't, but when you stop to think about, that's pretty hard to answer too.

¹ De Chardin, Pierre Teilhard, *The Future of Man*, Harper and Row, New York, NY, 1959, 1964, p. 88.