

## Reflections from Rev. Eric on his ministry

**Worship.** I strive to craft worship services that combine story, music, wisdom of the ages and personal reflection so that people feel held, challenged and inspired. What people need in worship is to experience that we are not alone. That all of us are part of something larger than ourselves. That, despite all the complications of modern life, we are each part of a larger narrative that includes joy, beauty, and, to play on the lyrics of one of our hymns, needs which we can serve (*For All That Is Our Life*, STLT #128).

The job of the sermon is to lift up a facet of life's complexity and see if there isn't a new way or two to look at it. Sometimes I try to provide a bit of clarity. Sometimes I strive to lift up the consequences of a series of actions that may be hidden from view. Sometimes the best I can do is to lift up a question or two that I am still struggling to answer.

I've been moved to joyous tears by the sound of church choirs, and left scratching my head when listening to a preacher go on about the beauty of a sculpture that wasn't visible past the fourth row of the sanctuary. Of course, what works for some may not work for all. Therefore, variety is called for: J. S. Bach and Iris DeMent. Rhiannon Giddens and Stephen Sondheim.

Once each in the last two congregations I've served, I've preached a sermon titled *Folk Song Philosophy*, in which I talked about the times I've heard some of my deepest thoughts reflected in the lyrics to songs I've loved for years. While the title of those two sermons was the same, the content was completely different in each. The scope of inspiration takes more than a 15-20 minute sermon can do justice to. And I remain glad I had the presence of mind to preach on the life and music of Pete Seeger before he died.

I often hear our folks talk about the seven UU principles as things we have mastered. That is not a claim I make: I think we owe ourselves and others the honesty of our humility, by lifting up our principles as the beacons by which we strive to live our lives. In that, we use them to practice, practice, practice. Sometimes my goal is to inspire action.

**Theology.** I was raised in secular humanist UU congregations. While I studied the Bible in seminary and later was part of the Jesus Seminar, the Jewish and Christian scriptures were things I learned later in life. They are not part of my early foundation.

With that preamble, I will say that I consider myself a religious humanist. There are times when I've longed for the healing touch of a loving force. Times when I've felt more alone than I felt I could stand. Also, times when I've felt myself held in a caring embrace when no one else was physically present. And times when I've seen myself and all my worries pale in comparison to

the vastness of a clear night sky and felt not diminished but liberated by the gift of only having to live my own life.

That said, we are the ones that create the meaning of our lives. We see through human eyes, and as such our perspective is both vast and limited. As a result, we are called to be both visionary and humble. Who am I to criticize the beliefs of anyone else, as long as those beliefs do not limit or harm others?

***Building Trust.*** Here are my guideposts on earning trust:

- Listen and ask, gently, about what might lay beneath the words others say.
- Be yourself.
- Do what you say you will do.
- Call it like you see it, while being open to other perspectives.
- Demonstrate you care about other's welfare.
- Be willing to laugh at yourself. Often.
- Own your mistakes.
- Apologize when you need to.
- And say thank you at least as often as you ask for someone's participation in the life of the congregation.

***Pastoral Care.*** There is a strong pastoral core to my ministry. I am not a therapist, though I am someone who listens carefully. I also enjoy working with lay members to help them to extend the reach of the congregation's care beyond what I can do myself. A short story:

Several years ago, a member of the congregation I served was deemed too old to receive a new liver by a local hospital. Eventually, she found a hospital out-of-state, and the operation was a success. Shortly after, I was going through the city where she was recovering, and had a chance for a short visit. We were mostly quiet. There wasn't that much to say, beyond it being so good to see a spark in her eyes again. She lived two years longer, and during that time she went skiing one more time with her family.

***Children's, Youth and Adult RE.*** If Unitarian Universalists want to have any lasting positive impact, then we owe it to the next generations to give them all the attention and love they deserve and help them become the best people they can be.

Each year of my life, I find new reasons to be grateful to have been raised UU. The impact of our love and encouragement for our young ones to bring out their unique gifts and energy can never be underestimated. I'm one who welcomes the sounds little ones add to worship. And throughout

my career as a religious leader, I've seen time and time again the truth not only in the African proverb *it takes a village to raise a child*, but the examples of the corollary, *it takes a child to raise a village*.

My approach to youth work is to be as supportive as I can, and look for opportunities to get to know the youth. Over the years I have overseen Coming of Age classes, helped lead a group of youth to the Justice General Assembly in Phoenix in 2012, led a youth pilgrimage to our partner church in Transylvania and been one of the adults accompanying over 30 of our youth to the March for Our Lives in Washington, D.C.

I like to promote a framework for Adult Religious Education that includes: UU history and identity, leadership development, anti-racism, learning from conflict, faith development, spiritual autobiography, and end of life planning. Someone who had made his name in Leadership Development said that the two pillars of young adult ministry were helping folks develop the capacity for intimacy and leadership. If you add social justice, the same is true for congregations.

Sometimes the learning takes place during monthly meetings and briefer conversations during the week. Sometimes the learning takes place in training workshops or in coaching sessions. All of these have their place, although I will add that I've found sending two or more people to any outside training is far better than sending anyone alone. The biggest risk I've found is in thinking we know all there is to know already. There is always more for us to learn.

***Social Justice, Anti-Oppression Work and the Community.*** While I will reflect on a number of concerns shortly, there are two that I am very much looking forward to addressing in a Canadian context. The first of these is the respect deserved by Indigenous people. Through VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America: the in-country equivalent to the U.S. Peace Corps) I did some work alongside the staff of the St. Paul (Minnesota) Native American Center. This proved a rich experience, and I look forward to working with the indigenous peoples in the Ottawa area.

And over the last several years, beginning in earnest when I worked to have solar panels installed on the roof of the UU Church of Columbus, I've grown increasingly interested in how faith communities can help inspire the changes needed to slow the advance of global climate change. Aspiring to do so means facing both the relationships between complex socio-political forces, seemingly intractable norms and the pervasive feeling that we are already too late to change anything for the better. Who better to help give birth to change and hope than our faith communities?

Moving on, the release of *The Gadfly Papers* by the Rev. Todd Eklof underscores my understanding that Unitarian Universalist exceptionalism is alive and well and hampers our hopes of being the religious movement many hope we can be. (Yes, I've coined *UU exceptionalism* after the phrase *American exceptionalism*. I find troubling similarities within

some camps in our denomination who feel we can do, or have done, no wrong.) That said, there have been times when I have also criticized our denomination for earlier efforts to create a more diverse, multiculturally aware faith.

Leading with guilt is not going to get us where we want to be. We are learning as we go. Robin DiAngelo's work on White Fragility has been very useful, providing a foundation to help white people like me reconcile themselves to the reality of their participation in a culture based on a foundational belief of white superiority.

In Columbus, I helped lead a *Beloved Conversations* adult education program for members of the church staff. Prior to that, I led classes in a program the congregation developed called *Diversity Learning Circles* in which participants took the Intercultural Development Research Institute (IDI) inventory and volunteered at an inner-city free store and food pantry.

BREAD is Columbus' interfaith congregationally-based community organizing group. It selects a new justice concern to focus on each year. Over the last several years I was part of two BREAD research teams: Education and Gun Violence.

When I was on it, the Education team was focused on changing school district practices that encouraged the 'school to prison' pipeline. The team was able to gain the ear of the School Superintendent and hold quarterly meetings with them and their staff. The Gun Violence team was looking at policies and practices that could engage local communities to reduce the number of shootings in the city. That team met regularly with the city Director of Public Safety and the Police Chief.

As an interim minister now, I am doing less direct social justice ministry, though I still regularly participate in the monthly zoom calls the Racine Mayor has with faith leaders, and I proudly marched in a peaceful protest march following the shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha.

Being at a table with clergy from other faith traditions is one of the unexpected joys I've found in ministry. In recent years, the staff at the local settlement house provided background on several of the guests that came to the church looking for money for food, lodging, etc. Being with folks from other faith traditions helps remind us of how much we have in common. This is often inspiring to both clergy and laity. What is important is that we don't have to do it alone.

***Denominational Activities.*** Congregations do not exist in a vacuum. By sharing best practices and cooperating on larger projects, we can do more than any of us can do alone. I have a long track record of involvement beyond the congregation, whether it be in UU Ministers Association leadership to district (now regional) efforts, and now the UU Partner Church Council. And while I plan on continuing this denominational work, I would not want to start any new venture for at

least a year after beginning my next ministerial settlement. This is a time for focusing on putting down roots. Branches will follow in due course.

And while my Unitarian / Universalist experience has primarily been in the U.S. context, I know enough to realize that Canadian Unitarianism is not the same as what I have known. I have begun reading Phillip Hewitt's *Unitarians in Canada*, and look forward to learning how I can be most helpful to and support the work of the Canadian Unitarian Council.

**Growth.** As J.R.R. Tolkien wrote that "all that is gold does not glitter," church membership and growth are not all about numbers. The work of creating the best congregations possible calls out the best of who we can be. And that, I believe, is what so many of us are looking for now. One of my foundational understandings is that congregations are at their best when the members love, challenge and support one another. And when these elements are the fabric of a congregation's DNA, the energy on Sunday mornings is going to attract more newcomers.

Congregations can grow in numerical size as well as maturity, capacity to play a role in their surrounding communities, and ability to stay in relationship with one another despite times of challenge.

The institution of the congregation is more vulnerable than ever before. Public trust has eroded across the board. As a result, the work of congregations in a small, progressive denomination is both more important and harder than ever.

**Stewardship and Finances.** Congregations that inspire their members to give generously are simply going to be able to do more with the resources at their disposal than congregations whose members feel less direct ownership or commitment.

I've come to understand that those who are able to pledge more often worry about responsibility, authenticity and the legacy they leave behind, and those who are not able to give as much financially struggle with having less and navigating their place in the world.

But there is more to it than that. If generosity is something a congregation values, then it is important, I feel, that the minister both show a sustained interest and lead by example. While I've never tithed 10% to the church I serve, in congregations where I have served in a settled position, I have usually given 7% of my adjusted gross income. It matters to me. Being generous feels good, and I like the feeling of having skin in the game.

In difficult times, I'd rather folks let their congregation know that they will not be able make their full pledge than feel bad but stay quiet about it. Everyone hates to admit it if their circumstances are less than expected. Preaching on all of this has been helpful in opening up a wider discussion on generosity and the role of the church in our lives.

Just as I like having a role in the stewardship of the congregation I serve, I also feel it is important to have at least a finger on the pulse of the overall church finances. At the same time, I want no one to think I have an MBA. While I agree with those who see a church budget as being as much a moral document as a practical one, I'm not someone you should go to for financial advice.

During the last church year in Columbus, our Board Chair did not feel he or the Board needed to see detailed monthly financial statements. I let the Chair know I disagreed and made sure I was put on the Finance Team's email distribution list.

***The Long-Term Work of the Congregation.*** In any form of shared ministry, clergy and lay members should work together to advance the work of the congregation. Church leaders want to know that their minister supports and appreciates their efforts. People want to feel valued by their minister. Furthermore, in addition to worship leading and teaching, team and committee work is one of the best ways congregational leaders get to know, and become known by, their minister. Both clergy and laity are responsible for part of the whole. Communication and mutual respect are crucial. And how we do what we do is as important as the result.

I want to learn what folks see as their mission. A congregation needs something members can get behind, that was created from their own experience and hopes. Regarding congregational long-range planning, I love the idea, and hope I am not simply jaded on the topic. But I've never seen it done well as a stand-alone project of any church I've served. At best, I think such plans come from pastors and lay leaders working together, based on their understanding of the congregation, to fashion goals that speak to the congregation as a whole. These goals will stem from the congregation's understanding of itself, and what it sees as the role it wants to play in the wider community.

***The Way Forward.*** These are the questions I hope you are asking yourselves: Who are we called to be? Who are our neighbors, and how are we called to be in relationship with them? To whom is our congregation accountable? And how? And what do we, as individuals and as a community, have to learn? How can we best prioritize our goals, so that we may actually achieve what is most important among them? What are we willing to do and give in order to achieve our goals and fulfill our promise? Are we willing to relinquish our desire to be perfect? And lastly, how are we going to celebrate when we meet our goals?