

November 13, 2003

TO: Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashua, NH  
FROM: Michael Durall  
RE: Interim report

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### I. First impressions

I enjoyed my weekend visit very much, and appreciated the gracious hospitality of so many people. The Nashua church has much to be proud of, including:

- Beautiful, well maintained buildings
- A history of almost 180 years of service
- Thoughtful and capable clergy and lay leadership
- Ample intellectual and financial resources in its congregants

In my work, I promote a “three for one” policy. This means if that if people have complaints, they need to say three good things about the church first. I believe this reflects the balance in many churches, Nashua included.

At the same time, the congregation faces significant challenges as it looks to the future. These challenges are presented in this report. At the outset, however, I do wish to acknowledge the good things that happen at the church, and the love and dedication shown by many of its members.

## II. A time of reckoning awaits the Nashua UU church

Establishing new habits can be difficult for churches. Reasons include:

- Churches are perceived as tradition-keepers, preservers of the past
- Congregants may hold strong emotional feelings about what church should be
- There may not be a clear-cut perception that change is actually needed

As important as these issues are, they pale in comparison to the grave financial situation that currently exists at the church. Treasurer Jon Lasselle reported that if the church continues to draw sizable sums from the endowment and if pledges remain low, the church will deplete its financial reserves in 15-17 years.

Unless there is a dramatic turnaround in its financial policies, the UU Church of Nashua would need to scale back its current operations by 65 to 75 percent over the coming years. This timeframe assumes there will be no further downturns in the stock market in the next decade and a half. If there is a downturn, the 15 – 20 year scenario will be shortened accordingly.

Last year's budget provides a recent example. In the 2002/03, the church drew \$114,000 from its Fleet funds and \$115,000 from the Anna Stearns fund for general operations; in addition to \$180,000 for the elevator – over \$400,000 in one fiscal year alone. The pledge drive raised \$139,000, about 34 percent of the church's operating costs. This is not a formula that will sustain the congregation.

## III. Two choices lie ahead

The first is for the church to initiate a “full court press” in persuading current members, especially the most elderly, to leave sizable sums of money in their estate plans for the church. To achieve the level of income in 2002/03 (\$230,000), the church will need to establish an endowment of \$5 million or perhaps more, as large endowments often result in even lower levels of giving among current members.

Using this method, the church would continue the tradition of the more generous souls of the past subsidizing the less generous souls of today. Many UU churches find this perfectly acceptable, though I do not. The Nashua church will need to make that judgment call. It is also important to note that bequest programs may not realize financial gains for many years.

The second choice is that by accident of history, current members of the UU Church of Nashua will determine whether the congregation will begin to pay its own way if bequests do not come in, and whether the church will scale back by a factor of two-thirds to three-fourths.

If the church chooses the second route, the next ten years are critical and will require courageous leadership, and a call to congregants for dedication, commitment, and sacrifice to keep the church alive. This will include a dramatic shift in attitudes toward charitable giving, and a pledge drive that brings in at least three times the current amount.

Most financial advisors claim that middle class Americans could double their current levels of charitable giving and not notice any difference in their day-to-day lives. Using this formula, the financial solution appears simple. Will \$100 donors give \$300? Will \$250 donors give \$750? Will \$1,000 donors give \$2,000 or \$3,000? I believe these goals are well within reach of the Nashua congregation, as the capacity of members to give (in Nashua and all other UU churches) is not the issue.

Will members of the UU Church of Nashua consider increasing their giving if it means saving the church? My experience with UUs is that they will sometimes rise to the occasion for a special need, but are reluctant to support annual church operations. The Nashua church has a history of well-to-do families paying a disproportionate share since its founding in the 1820s, and this is a powerful legacy.

To add to the church's financial struggles, UU churches are influenced by larger elements of Unitarian Universalism, in particular our denomination being a low expectation faith. One Nashua congregant told me, "I like the church just the way it is – complete freedom." Numerous comments from parishioners that follow in this report reflect the attitude of low obligation, an attitude that is embedded in Unitarian Universalism's "genetic code." This will be a significant obstacle to overcome.

#### IV. The format of this report

This report is divided into four sections. The first section discusses the church of today and the church of tomorrow. The second section contains responses from congregants that help define the nature and character of the Nashua church.

The third section contains my major recommendation, which if taken will require an investment of time and effort. In the fourth section, I present a number of additional recommendations that can be implemented in the short term if the leadership wishes.

I limit interim reports to about 10 pages, and ask that the entire congregation review this report. The purpose of the interim report is to elicit responses, to assist the congregation in generating ideas from its own ranks, thereby discerning its own future.

#### V. The church of today vs. the church of tomorrow

During my visit, we discussed the concept of “civic faith” that was prevalent in the 1950s. In that era, it was assumed that people were basically good, and came to church as loyal Americans, responsible citizens, and decent parents. Churches reflected the predominantly homogeneous Caucasian and Christian values of the society.

This church was sufficient until people began to ask, “If that’s all church means, why do we need it?” Millions of people left traditional churches in the late 1950s, while those who stayed tended to maintain the civic faith, the only one they had ever known.

The civic faith manifests itself today in UU congregations whose members tell me they come to church for two main reasons: to be among like-minded people, and to be with people they know. The church expects little of them beyond that. Churches offer programs and events, but do not view their role as changing people’s lives in some fundamental way.

#### The Church of Tomorrow

Church-shoppers today are seeking a very different church. Quite often, people coming to churches are motivated by crises in their lives; or they are seeking change, transformation, a life that is fundamentally different, or a life that is deeper and more adventuresome.

The leading-edge questions that bring them to church are: How can I create a meaningful spiritual life? How can I become part of a community of meaning and purpose? These are not questions that a civic faith can answer – a faith with an emphasis on individual autonomy, human self-sufficiency, rationality, and a belief that people are basically fine the way they are.

Theologian Walter Brueggemann captured this aspect of changing congregational life perfectly when he said, “The church that you have been preparing so carefully is being taken away from you – by the grace of God.”

I believe the challenge is not just within the Nashua church, but rather the challenge is to re-define what Unitarian Universalism means in this era. Central to this message is the life-transforming power of the faith. I believe this is a critical element in the ability of the Nashua church to create a viable future.

## VI. Voices from the congregation

I asked parishioners to write down answers to questions about what the church is called to do, how to define the soul of the church, what they yearned for in congregational life, attitudes toward money, and if they had a metaphor that described the church. This helps me gain an understanding of the congregation's members, and address their heartfelt issues in my recommendations.

### What is the UU Church of Nashua called to do in this place and time?

"The church is an extended family, and people feel comfortable in most situations."

"To be a liberal voice in a conservative area, offering inspiration, community, and in filling the needs of the greater community."

"To educate children and members in accordance with our principles."

"To provide an open, accepting, challenging, religious, and spiritual environment that will foster our spiritual development."

"To enhance personal growth and develop friendships in an open, inquiring way."

"To provide a place where (mostly) like-minded individuals can meet to discuss issues of the day, renew social contacts, share each other's energy, joys, concerns."

"To support people's search for truth and meaning. To help us find peace within and without."

"A spiritual, social support system for a liberal religious group."

### How do you define the church's soul?

"An acceptance and respect of the individual in relationship to the values of UU beliefs."

"A strong humanistic bent with a desire for spirituality around the edges."

"A warm nurturing soul."

"One of unity that strives to bring all hearts together."

"A comfortable place locked in complacency."

“The soul of a searcher.”

“The spirit is willing but the inertia is strong.”

“Our soul, or burning ember, is the endowment. Every decision revolves around it.”

“The UU principles are our soul, but they are very dim.”

“It seems pretty diffuse and hard to pinpoint.”

“Many individuals have concern and commitment (soul) but the church does not organize or promote this.”

“No. We lack a commitment to a purpose greater than ourselves, and a dedication to those less fortunate.”

“A liberal voice, but short on action to back up that voice.”

“No. Just appendages of good intent.”

*What do you yearn for in the life of this church?*

“I yearn for a church that will transcend the secular to the spiritual.”

“I yearn for nothing. This congregation is dynamic and has a lot of colorful thinkers.”

“I yearn for the ability to do regular, church-wide charitable hands-on activities with my family. The time to teach kids the value of contributing their talents is when they are young.”

“I want to be challenged, to be made to re-evaluate my life, beliefs, and state of the world. I want uncomfortable situations.”

“Activity, bustling life, conflict, energy, and a focus for all that.”

“A centralized purpose.”

“Challenge me. Tell me what I need to do to become a better person.”

“A meaningful way to be of service in the world.”

“To continue the generally amicable relationships that have characterized this church for many years.”

“A sense of community that arises from our praying together more.”

“Something to do besides spending money left to us by former pillars.”

“A real, tangible sense of this church being a positive force for compassion, justice, and good in the wider community.”

“More surprises!”

“A deeper understanding of our purpose as a congregation, beyond what we personally ‘get’ from being a member.”

“Less about ourselves and more about the world. More activism.”

“My main concern is the seeming lack of compassion displayed by the church to the outside world. No outreach grants this year, and nothing given to the UUA, UUSC, or the district.”

*What is the “mindset” or attitudes toward money at the Nashua church?*

“Money is a taboo subject, but one that needs to be tied more to our mission.”

“Most people cover their ears and sing ‘la la la’ when it comes to money. We have a hard time understanding how to use it, or know its flexibilities or other uses.”

“Don’t ask, don’t tell. We have plenty of money so individuals don’t have to give.”

“A lack of money.”

“You people are always asking us for money.”

“We are cheap but pride ourselves on being generous – generous with the endowment, that is.”

“Worry and risk aversion.”

“Financial realities are not acknowledged.”

“The endowment has made us conservative and more concerned with self preservation than our role in society.”

## Metaphors

“A number of warm logs that if organized well would make a big fire.”

“A family I actually like.”

“A fine gem in a pierced setting, no longer wanting to adorn the standard ear lobe, but afraid to be worn elsewhere.”

“My lifetime religious home and source of inspiration.”

“Noah’s ark: a place of refuge where people come to look toward the future and for a better world.”

“A ship with too many tourist destinations.”

“Nothing to fear but fear itself.”

“Drowning in our own stability.”

“Church of the holy endowment.”

“The Lake Wobegon of churches. We are all above average.”

“A community clinic where you can always find help and solace when in need.”

“A crusty old Yankee farmer, great values but very frugal.”

“A glass of fine wine, a joy to those who taste it.”

“A friendly curmudgeon, unwilling to take risks, but who has a million dollars in the bank.”

“A comfortable pair of jeans we use but take for granted.”

“An Oldsmobile – steady, solid, reliable, and perhaps a little out of fashion.”

“A late winter’s yard, with bulbs in the ground that haven’t sprouted.”

“A well-running engine, but with the fuel supply endangered.”

## VII. Specific recommendations for the UU Church of Nashua

Based on my visit to the church and the observations of parishioners, I have one major recommendation, in addition to a number of suggestions that follow later.

### A period of discernment

Church literature today contains numerous references to churches taking a period of three to six months to determine what the future will hold. One church writer phrased this as, “Jettison the normal calendar and spend six months entirely to build clarity about your core values, beliefs, role, and purpose.”

The Nashua church is the only church in the Veatch study that I have made this recommendation to, and no UU church to my knowledge has initiated this process. (I wish more would, however, and Nashua might be a beacon for other churches in the district and nationwide.)

A period of discernment might involve congregants reading selected books and/or articles, a number of sermons, after-church discussions, various forums, guest speakers, and visiting other churches, especially those more conservative that are growing in membership.

I recommend this somewhat dramatic approach because churches incline toward gradualism, that the best changes come slowly. I believe the Nashua church needs to instill a sense of urgency in its future, which would help build excitement and adventure in its congregational life.

In this process, the church should strive to determine what “integrity of membership” is, and define what an “authentic” community looks like. In my view, money is a by-product of an engaging church. If the UU Church of Nashua can define its role and purpose as reaching out to serve in ever-greater measure, money will not be an issue.

## VIII. The critical role of church leaders,

It is extremely important to recognize how successful initiatives come about in church. Meaningful change requires a few champions to see a process through to the end, and these dedicated souls require a significant dose of stamina.

The hearty souls who lead stewardship, membership, and any discernment efforts also need the support of the leadership of the church. This includes the support of clergy, whose role in a growing congregation becomes less and less pastoral and more oriented toward program development and outreach.

In churches of your size, the primary role of the minister (beyond preaching) is the “care and feeding” and spiritual growth of a core group of 25-35 people. These include people in leadership roles, and those who may be called upon to lead the initiatives outlined in this report. If this core group is strong, the overall health of the church will be enhanced, and the church’s ability to achieve its hopes and dreams greatly increased.

#### IX. Additional recommendations, and concluding comments

-The church should give a minimum of 10 percent of its operating budget to outreach, and achieve this level at the earliest opportunity. This is in addition to denominational and district dues. Healthy congregations give away a larger than average share to outreach, and paradoxically, these churches display less anxiety about money.

-I also recommend that the Sunday offering be taken each week, and be given away. This money can count toward the church’s 10 percent outreach line item.

-I encourage the church to become “permission granting,” by beginning a “New Opportunities Seed Fund.” Congregants should be encouraged to believe they can do something about sorrow in the world when they see it, and that the church will stand behind them. Money from the Sunday collection can help begin this seed fund. This fund should be managed by the Senior Minister and president of the congregation.

-I encourage church leaders in a congregation of your size and stature to not to ask the question, “Can we afford it?” but rather, “Is it the right thing to do?” I believe that doing the right thing is an investment in the future, and in my experience, money given away comes back tenfold, in one form or another.

-Regarding leadership, the “formula” for meaningful change is that three-fourths of congregational leaders believe that “business as usual” is no longer acceptable. In written responses, numerous church leaders said that business as usual is no longer acceptable, in particular reflecting their frustration over low pledging, a culture of scarcity, and the lack of outreach.

-In determining the role of the UU Church of Nashua, congregational leaders may find themselves challenging long-held attitudes among parishioners. This may require a hearty dose of courage among the church’s current leaders. It is well documented that leaders who are conflict-averse and risk-averse will find their congregations on a plateau or in decline, both in membership and in other areas of church vitality.

In congregations the size of Nashua, leaders should lead, and carry with them the courage of their convictions. At times, they may take some heat for their stands, but this is far better for the church's health than attempting to please everyone at all times.

### Concluding comments

As somewhat of a traditionalist, I prefer a robed choir. I believe robed choirs, or choirs that wear stoles, look better and sing better. Some choirs mightily resist this suggestion, but it begs the question, "Do we live for ourselves or others?" I am not singling out the choir with this issue. Rather, people who are church-shoppers today are seeking a deeper spiritual life, or wish to be part of a community of meaning and purpose. A robed choir adds to the sense of the sacred, and would be a visible and highly symbolic gesture if the church embarks on an intensive effort to re-define its role and purpose.

I am unsure if it is possible to move the sign outside the church from being parallel to the street, to being perpendicular to the street. This is the "theory" of church signs. With the sign being parallel, the opportunity to communicate with a large number of commuters each day is lost.

I also recommend that the church discontinue the practice of including sermon titles and the name of the preacher in the newsletter. This creates a "pick and choose" faith. UU minister Victor Carpenter often said that, "Small miracles occur in church each Sunday, and these do not depend on the preacher or the sermon."

In conclusion, I believe that God, however defined, gives every congregation what it needs, and the UU Church of Nashua is no exception. Clergy, lay leaders, and those in the pews should believe, in author Paul Wilke's words, that the church can accomplish things it thinks it cannot do. In doing so, the congregation will be pushed to the edge of its comfort zone, but that is appropriate and is what more UU churches should do. The church will address many of the powerful yearnings of parishioners that are included in this report.

The Nashua church has all the ingredients it needs to accomplish anything it sets its mind to. If the Lord calls, the Lord will provide. This may not be everyone's theology, but it should be our practice.

