

## Extraordinary Riches Await Our Discovery

The Revs. Duane H. Fickeisen and Judy Welles<sup>1</sup>  
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley  
March 16, 2008 • Tenth Anniversary of Charter

*We have only begun to know the power that is in us  
if we would join our solitudes in the communion of struggle.  
So much is unfolding that must complete its gesture,  
so much is in bud*

— Denise Levertov

### Call to Worship

Welcome to you who gathered ten years ago to create the Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley by becoming its Charter Members.

Welcome to you who have supported this congregation in the ensuing years with skills, expertise and access to resources; with wise words of counsel; and with the gifts of your money and your life energy.

Welcome to you who have come today for the first time, curious about who we are and what we are about.

Welcome to everyone who have gathered today to witness this significant anniversary in the life of our young congregation and to join us in celebration.

We gather to mark not a beginning, but an anniversary.



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This congregation already has a rich history. Our roots are vigorous and well founded in the fertile soil of our Unitarian tradition of freedom, reason, and tolerance and in the Universalist vision of hope and courage in the secure knowledge of the kindness and everlasting love of God.

The growing branches are fed by the enthusiasm and commitment of founders who had a vision and the many others who have joined them and pledged their hearts in covenant to weave the fabric of this beloved community. Their vision of a robust and enduring Unitarian Universalist congregation serving the people of the Cumberland Valley and its environs is a healthy reality.

Sheltered between these mountains, nourished by this landscape, and held in the context of these historic places, we are building a radical community — one with deep roots — founded on the fundamentals of the ongoing revelation of truth, the authority of the individual in matters of faith, the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and a profound respect for web of creation.

The chalice that stands before us, made from a tree that grew right here on our property, is symbolic of the creative potential, of the shelter of home, the cave, the womb. It represents the grail cup that holds the sweet wine of our commitment, the strength and integrity of the covenant that we make to join together in love and the everlasting quest for truth and meaning.

The flame we now kindle represents life energy, the fire of passion and compassion, and our commitment to the mission of our congregation.

Come, let us continue to create this new congregation and proclaim its presence.

Come, let us celebrate this birth and the hope and promise of the future that it brings.

Come, let us hold up and shape what we deem worthy.

Come, let us worship together!

**Covenant  
(spoken in unision)**

We join together to challenge and support one another in our efforts to speak honestly, to act with compassion, to love without

prejudice, to live with integrity, and to respond to the demands of justice with courage.

We pledge to support our congregation and the Association of which it is a part as we are able, with our hearts and minds, our talents and resources.

In our work together across the generations, may we become a more effective instrument of service; a voice for liberation, reason and respect; and a community in which we can celebrate all that life brings us.

### **Prayer for This Congregation**

*Ten years ago we offered this prayer at our charter Sunday worship service. The aspirations expressed were drawn from the expressed wishes of the members. It remains relevant.*

Will you join us in a prayer for this congregation?

May this congregation continue to be robust.

May it endure. May it be powerful.

May it always be a thriving and vibrant community.

May it always be a community that supports families and develops responsible, loving children filled with awe at the mystery of their world and having the courage to live fully.

May it be a safe a place to express doubts and questions. Here may we be both students and teachers as we learn from each other in our journeys toward that which calls us forth.

May this always be a community that is both strong and gentle, to hear and hold the anguish and pain of life and to help heal the wounds of broken promises and broken relationships, of unmet expectations, and of injuries, illnesses, and death.

May this always be a community that embraces joy and celebrates together. Here may laughter and play be welcome.

May we model living and loving in covenant with each other, trusting the bonds that connect us and respecting and delighting in diversity. When we are in conflict and when we fail in our quest for integrity, may we call each other back to our covenant in love.

May this congregation continue to be a powerful force for peace through justice and compassion for all people. May we

freely serve others as we work together to transform lives and care for the world.

May we see the fingerprints of the divine all over each other and be reminded of the universalist spirit of forgiveness, tolerance, and love.

May it be so. Amen.

### **Sermon**

Duane Fickeisen

Our founding members had a big vision of ministry and of the potential for liberal religion in the Cumberland Valley. They imagined a religious home — a safe sanctuary where their beliefs would be welcomed and where they might grow spiritually in communion with others. At the same time they recognized explicitly that if it succeeded — and it wasn't always clear that it would — it would do so only if they released it to be shaped members who were not yet involved.

Diane Reed, who chaired the Steering Committee and was the first President of the congregation recalls:

“The founders of this congregation understood and subscribed to the concept that this congregation was founded to be given away to future generations. And the small circle of people who joined hands and brought this congregation to life were committed to opening that circle and making it even wider as UUCV grew.”

It's no small trick to create a new institution that thrives for a decade. It takes vision and wit and wisdom. And it takes a critical mass of folks willing to share the work of building. Indeed our founders not only had great foresight and vision, they freely gave their time, talents, and treasure to launch this congregation. Those gifts are extraordinary riches and they have given us a solid foundation.

New congregations are fragile, and even after a history much longer than ours stress and strains can tear them apart. The most robust and healthy congregations have found a healthy balance between tradition and transformation. They understand their roots and celebrate the past with pride, but they are not stuck in the past or the present. They are not complacent, seldom content,

always imagining an even greater fulfillment of mission and vision. They inspire commitment.

The beginnings of the congregation were in shared conversations and imaginings, and eventually in the summer picnics that Jan Ruby and Barclay Baird hosted at their farm. Food played an important role — these were hungry folks who gathered around the potluck table to socialize, to explore ideas, to worship, and to imagine the future. They were hungry for a spiritual home and for the bonds of community that so many of you have found here.

It was an open table, always with room for one more. Ron and Karen Nickerson, who are visiting us today, were the first chairs of our Membership Committee, and they constantly reminded all of the lay leadership that *everyone* is on the Membership Committee. The practice of radical hospitality was vital to our growth and it is a continuing part of our signature ministry.

Eighty-two adults signed our membership book as charter members. Their names are listed on an insert in the bulletin. Of our charter members, seven have deceased. We remember Eunice “Chappie” Chapman, Lila Phipps, and Jim and Mickey Kegel. And Wes Gardner, Tori Brower, and Don Durr. About half of those still living are continuing active members today. We also have some visitors among us who are no longer members, but have returned to join our celebration.

I’d like to invite all of you present who were charter members to stand and receive our gratitude. If you stay for cake after the service, we’ll all have the opportunity to practice hospitality and express our gratitude personally.

Several of our charter members contributed memories of the early days for the booklet that I hope you got when you came in today. Their stories are a part of our history, a part of who we have become.

There are many numeric measures of church growth — membership, attendance on Sunday mornings, children enrolled in religious education, median household pledge of financial support, and total budget, for example. What they show in our case is that we’ve become a healthy mid-sized congregation, doubling in size over ten years. But they also show that we’ve reached a plateau in membership and attendance and in giving to our operating fund. We’re at a challenging size with expectations and dreams that exceed our resources. It’s been a good resting place, but sometimes I feel that we could be much more, that it is time for us to be bold again, to take some risks — we’ve done that

again, to take some risks — we've done that many times in our short history with good success — and bust through the plateau.

It's time to rekindle the enthusiasm of our founders and to take seriously the role each of us plays in membership development. We're poised for growth, with solid programs and fresh energy among our staff and leaders.

More important perhaps than the numbers are the stories we tell about the journey so far and the dreams we hold for the future.

Early in the life of the congregation we experienced the sudden departure of Matt and Kathy Ruby and their family. Matt had been the other New Congregation Organizer along with Diane Reed. Matt was very well organized, understood how systems work and the nuances of their interactions, and knew how to create a spreadsheet and budget. Kathy was our first treasurer and kept the books.

Matt was also our first children's religious educator. He brought a contagious enthusiasm and energy to everything he was involved in. When the chance came for them to move to Minnesota — back home — they jumped at it and left us rather suddenly. We sent them off with a party, mourned their departure, and missed them dearly. But the next Sunday the religious education program continued seamlessly — well at least that's how I remember it — no doubt there were some glitches. The bills and payroll kept being paid on time. We learned early that no one is indispensable and that with enough enthusiastic commitment to our programs, even the departure of two of the key leaders didn't cause the congregation to falter.

I believe that was due to the widely shared commitment to the future, to open doors that welcomed newcomers into leadership roles, and to a willingness to step forward and do what needed to be done.

That willingness to say "yes!" to what needed to be done to make the vision a reality included people taking on leadership roles and learning on the job, taking many risks to invest in an uncertain future, and doing such nasty tasks as we found Dee DeRoche engaged in one Sunday morning as she was cleaning off a mess from the steps of Denny Hall after, as she said, someone had left their curry there the night before.

And indeed others said “Yes!” too. The Chalice Lighter grant that supports the Music Director position is one of six we have received over the decade. Bob Johnsen recalls in the memory book that the first was to hire him as a consultant to the newly forming Steering Committee. Other grants helped pay for new staff positions and to buy this building. All told we have received well over \$130,000 in grant funds from the UUA, Chalice Lighters, and other UU congregations to help us get launched.

When we needed a larger space than Denny Hall and decided to purchase this building for \$250,000 — new construction of comparable space would cost many times that — members made commitments to a capital campaign that exceeded its goal and enabled us to close the deal, furnish the building, and pay the debt service for three years while our operating fund grew through pledges so that it would eventually be able to cover the mortgage costs.

The hymnals you’ve been singing from were all purchased with donations — take a look at the bookplate inside the front cover to see whom you can thank for the one you’ve been singing from. When I asked them to, the UU congregations in Wilmington, Lancaster, and Mainline in Devon each contributed to our hymnal fund to help us celebrate our new building.

Of the several new congregations that were started using a similar model, this one has been extraordinarily successful. Several of the others did not grow beyond about 75 members and have had to cut back on their staff. A few have grown even beyond our numbers, but overall we’re among the ones that other folks in the denomination point to with admiration and pride.

Judy and I been asked how we account for the success, and our answer has been that there is no single factor, but rather a synergy of factors. Among them we count dedicated lay leadership, commitment of the members to hospitality, good ministry, and sheer good luck. The key has been willingness to take risks — leaps of faith — and readiness to take advantage of opportunities as they arose.

The enterprise will likely always have some fragility to it. An unresolved deep conflict, grievous misconduct on the part of a staff member or lay leader, or financial collapse, for example, could threaten its health. Indeed, reaching a tenth anniversary is no guarantee that we’ll be here another ten, let alone 100 years.

Faith though can get us through almost any imagined scenario. Faith in the good will of the folks already here and those who have yet to discover us. Faith in shared vision and it's fulfillment.

We've looked back a bit, but it is the future that beckons.

Music has always been an important part of the congregation's life. Having a staff member to work closely with the other worship leaders to more fully incorporate music into the worship experience was a logical next step in our growth. In less than three months since David started as our Music Director, he's been inviting Judy and me and the Worship Associates to transform our planning processes to better employ the power of music in worship. With David's guidance and Ken Law's direction, the choir is experiencing fresh enthusiasm. We expect to continue to enjoy offerings by Adam's Family Trio, the Question Marks, and the Recorder Trio along with some new groups. We hope to include more children's voices, too.

Last night's concert right here by Gordon Bok and Carol Rohl was a wonderful event with a comfortably full house and lots of energy. In addition to bringing many new folks into our building, it was a successful fundraiser for our operating fund. We look forward to more opportunities to be a venue for concerts.

With music in good hands, we have the opportunity to revisit our religious education program. As many of you know, Kevin will complete a five-year tenure as our Director of Religious Education this summer. He has brought five years of good administrative leadership, and his departure opens the opportunity to bring some fresh new ideas into our religious education program. He will leave us a program in good shape on which we can build for the future. Kevin's work with the Coming of Age program and our sexuality curriculum has served our middle school age group well.

Our espoused dedication to making the building accessible has met with many setbacks from changing building codes and increasing costs, but we are on the verge of installing a lift to provide safe and protected access to the lower level for wheelchair users and others who can't negotiate the stairs. With a recent generous anonymous donation and dedicated efforts by Ed Glasgow to negotiate contracts, we believe we have sufficient funding designated for the lift and we are in the process of applying for per-

mits. We hope to have completed the construction before this summer ends — maybe even sooner.

Your leadership has tentative plans for future improvements to the sanctuary, including a new sound system, air conditioning, and aesthetic improvements. The price tag will be high, but I hope we can develop a plan and start at least part of the work in the next two years. We already have a substantial gift as seed money for the projects.

But as important as staffing and facilities are, it is your participation the really matters, and that comes through programs. Our Small Group Ministry is thriving. There are now seven active groups, with a newly formed group at Greenridge Village. Several of our facilitators and the program leaders have gotten advanced training and we're hoping to host a regional retreat next fall to further improve the quality of the experience. We're learning to listen intentionally and deeply to "hear each other into speech" as feminist theologian Nellie Morton has said. The shift from conversation to listening has sometimes been subtle; sometimes met with resistance; but has profound implications for the quality of our being together. Next year the leadership plans to encourage our small groups to take more seriously the part of our mission that calls us to care for the world through intentional service projects.

We are finding other ways to connect with each other and experience intimacy and ultimacy. Our Adult Sunday School is now well into its second year, with a variety of excellent and well attended programs. The Caregivers support group has expanded its mission and incorporates both support for those who are primary caregivers and outreach to members and friends who have short term practical needs as a result of life changes. Their new name, Compassion and Caring Circle, reflects the change in mission. The Knitters and Stitchers, the Men's Group, the Women's Spirituality Group, the Soul Collage group, the Serious Stuff Book group, and others provide a variety of opportunities for socializing and networking, seeking support, exploring new ideas, and spiritual growth.

Judy and I are especially pleased with the Worship Associates program that brings other voices to the pulpit and offers training in the arts of crafting and presenting worship that engages and inspires you. We'd like to have a bigger group than we have this year — we've stretched the five participants by asking them to do more than they bargained for. If you've ever watched one of our

worship associates and thought, “Hey, I might be able to do that,” check out the worship section of our web site and visit our display table next month in the Social Hall to learn more. We’ll accept applications for next year’s program until May 4.

Our Social Action Council has sought to make sustainable change through our work in the wider world with projects both near and far. With our monthly Change for the World, we support mostly local nonprofit groups that offer progressive support to folks in our communities. Our bursary program supports the education of girls in Mozambique with profound effects on their lives and their villages. Pen pals and visitors have engaged women imprisoned at Muncy, and we send them frequent mailings with whole worship services. Four of our members are traveling to New Orleans to aid with post-hurricane cleanup and reconstruction this month, and Terri Smiley and Devonna Jonsson have just returned from a house building trip to Honduras. Terri is planning another trip next winter that will be cosponsored by UUCV and Second Presbyterian Church in Carlisle. Last week Elaine Livas met with some of us to talk about how UUCV can better support Project SHARE, the local food bank, and she spoke frankly about how much she appreciates the ability of UUs to meet SHARE clients with dignity and without dogma.

We are making a difference. And we are not content to rest on our laurels. There is so much more to be done. As people of privilege in a world that is increasingly divided between those who have more than we need and those who don’t have enough, we are called to be generous in our outreach and care.

Our communications are looking better all the time. Our Newsletter and our website have new formats and look much more inviting. We plan to develop a new logo to better communicate who we are. Greg Bear will convene a focus group to brainstorm images and ideas for it. You don’t need to be artistic to participate in the brainstorming — it’s going to be here in two weeks, after the service on March 30.

There are extraordinary riches here among us. Some of them have been discovered already, but more arrive with each next person who comes through our doorway. The future is bright if we have the vision and the faith and the commitment to create it. It is, after all, up to us — all of us — those present and those yet to come.

I chose the cover image for the order of service to show the enthusiasm I hope you'll feel as you dig into the riches of your congregation. It's a bit early in the season for real strawberry shortcake, made from berries grown right here in the Cumberland Valley. But it's not too early to start imagining the extraordinary riches of a fresh-from-the-oven homemade buttermilk biscuit, cut berries still warm from the field, with a generous dollop of fresh whipped cream.

Don't cheat and push the season by buying those big watery berry-like fruits trucked in from Southern California's Oxnard Plain that are already in the grocery stores. You'll spoil the thrill of the real thing and are sure to be disappointed. Sometimes it takes patience and hard work to get the very best. It's like that in your congregation, too. Patience and hard work pay off.

The season is short, so you'll want to invite others to share the bounty while it's fresh. Keep widening the circles, invite others into this wonderful congregation. Practice radical hospitality.

We offer excellent shortcakes at Foundry Day in early June here on the streets of Boiling Springs. The berries are grown just outside town. The shortcakes are homemade. Repeat customers line up at our booth all day long from the opening to closing. One woman who came by last year said she had been anticipating the shortcakes since winter, looking forward to them as one of the major features of Foundry Day.

That suggests that we've become an institution in town. And indeed we are becoming an increasingly important and influential player in the local community.

We should give thanks. Thanks for the holy times in our lives — those that come with both sorrow and delight, in grief and in joy sublime. For art and music and the delights of nature that come to our awakened senses, for comrades willing to share the work of transforming the planet through care. We sing the hope that our faith might be pressed into our fate, that our shared destiny may be blessed.

May UUCV continue to thrive as a source of both personal transformation and care for our world.

Amen.

### **Benediction**

We are still building this gift to the future. It does not belong only to those of us now here, but to the people who have yet to discover us. Diane Reed wrote to us, "As you move forward through the next decade and beyond, please keep these founding principles [of hospitality and welcome] in mind. Give the gift of UUCV to others, and ask them to join your ever-widening circle."

### **Chalice Extinguishing**

Alleluia!

We have created the Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley by the union of our individual commitments in a covenant of membership.

Alleluia!

Go from this place well loved. Love the world well.

Go from this place held in the embrace of community. Embrace the world with love.

Go from this place with your wounds healed. Heal the world with love.

Return to love and to be loved. To embrace and to be held. To heal and to be made whole.

As we extinguish the chalice flames, embody them. Let the fire of passion and commitment burn brightly in your soul. Take it into the world and bring it back here often to be rekindled in the warmth of community.

Go forth and light up the world, because *you are* the light of the world.

Go in peace, return in love.