

Nurturing Your Inheritance

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High Plains Church, UU

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This church was founded almost 20 years ago. Next February will be the 20th anniversary of the first High Plains Church worship service, and I hope you will really celebrate this. It is quite a feat to found and sustain a church, and you have done so. Four of your founding members are still here, although there will be a farewell party for two of them this evening.

You founded this church with 30 members and the intention of growing into being able to afford a minister and a building. You wanted to be the voice of liberal religion on the north side of Colorado Springs.

You moved from meeting space to meeting space for years. Much of that time, you were a church in a box, unpacking all your church needs each Sunday morning and packing them up again after coffee hour. It's a lot of work, requiring dedicated volunteers, week after week after week.

You held pledge drives, and hired ministers, part-time and then full-time. You paid your bills.

You longed for a home of your own – a church building with meeting space and Religious Education rooms. A place where you could host community events and be that center for liberal religion on the north side of Colorado Springs.

And then the opportunity arose to purchase an unconventional property, a Family Fun Center. It had a functional building and room to grow. You launched a Capital Campaign and borrowed money from your parent-church, All Souls, and the Unitarian Universalist Association.

You put in an enormous amount of work to transform this building into a beautiful, functional, and versatile worship and social space, and create the religious education rooms out back.

Five years ago, last September, your new church was dedicated.

Now, those of you who were here before you moved into this building have probably been placing yourself on this timeline as I spoke, remembering the work you did to make this happen. Those of you who came more recently may be waiting for me to get to your place on the timeline. And those of you who are new here, or just visiting, may be waiting for me to say something more relevant to you.

Well, something happened after you moved into this building. You circled the wagons. The church became very inwardly focused. I know that there are a number of reasons for this, and I'm not discounting those reasons, but I read something just yesterday from a church leadership blog by Carey Nieuwhof, that is important to remember. He said, very simply that, "you can make excuses or you can make progress, but you can't make both." Think about that. Do you want to make excuses, or do you want to make progress?

When people find a church, and decide to stay, they do so because they like what they found. It has become their church home. Very few people join a church thinking that they want to change it. Those of you who are relatively new here, may not even know a different model for how-to-do-church than what you see here.

And yet, in church, as in life, change and innovation is necessary all the time. This church has made many changes in its brief history. And life has been changing around us, very rapidly, in the last 20 years. Technology has changed the way we live, the ways we communicate, the forms of our relationships. Environmental degradation has changed the very weather that we depend upon for our water, our gardens, our food, and our sense of place in the cycles and seasons of the year. New generational demographics have changed the reasons that people come to church, if they come at all.

We must be prepared to respond to those changes and more.

If you are new here today, please know that something very exciting is about to happen at High Plains Church, and you can have a part in it. It is often the case that newcomers are more willing to risk change than those who have been here a long time.

Our story for all ages this morning was called *The Keeping Quilt*. The dresses and aprons and shirts and shawls from loved ones in "backhome"

Russia, were wearing out, or outgrown, so their fabrics were transformed into a beautiful quilt, preserving the stories of the people who made or wore them, and the love that went into them. This is what I am asking you to do.

In a church, you must always be looking at what can be improved. Churches that don't do this are failing. You have a goal. What needs to happen in order to achieve that goal?

For years, you have said that you want to grow. Your purchase of this building was a gamble based on a theoretical growth curve, pretty rapid growth, that didn't happen. You did grow some, but not enough.

So what needs to be done differently in order for your congregation to achieve its goal?

What most people don't seem to realize, is that growing a congregation, if that is what you really want to do, is not just the responsibility of the Board and a few key teams. It is every member's responsibility. I believe that your slow growth is due in large part to a great deal of ambivalence about losing the intimacy of the small congregation you were, losing a part of your inheritance, and unconscious patterns as a result of that ambivalence, that have effectively blocked you from achieving your goal.

Growing a congregation, especially when breaking through from one size church to another, requires a multi-faceted approach that I think of as a harmonic convergence – an exceptional alignment of the hearts, minds, and hands of the members – so that you are all working towards the same goal.

Like a quilting bee. One person may be cutting pieces, one ironing, one appliqueing pieces onto blocks, one sewing blocks together, one keeping the needles threaded, one serving the tea and sandwiches, but all are working towards the same goal.

Next Sunday, at your annual meeting, you will be asked to declare whether you are really committed to doing what it takes in order to grow. Because if you aren't committed to making necessary changes, it won't happen. I am hoping that you will be ready and willing to commit to growth.

It isn't realistic to think that you will reach your goal in a year's time, much as I would like to see that before I go. But with a commitment, you can

begin the process, including creating a new vision statement to go with your new mission.

The new Mission Statement, ready for your approval next week reads, “The mission of High Plains Church is to nurture a loving, respectful, religious community, inspire spiritual growth, and act for social justice.” Nurture! Inspire! Act! If that is adopted, every team in the church will be encouraged to consider their purpose in terms of the mission. How does your team help people to nurture, inspire, and act?

And each of you, as individuals, will be asked to consider what you can do to advance the mission. What are you doing to nurture, inspire, act?

If you commit to growing, there’s a lot to be done. Growing a congregation starts with looking at what you have to offer. Is it meeting the needs of new people coming to church? Is it keeping them here?

The demographics of church seekers have changed radically since I was a child. People looking for a new church today are not doing so because of societal expectations, or for intellectual stimulation or good music on Sunday morning. They are seeking a way for their lives to have meaning and purpose.

Churches have to offer that. Your church is now providing themed worship services and Soul Matters packets for spiritual growth and depth, and Small Group Social Change Ministry as a means to act for social justice. Faith Formation is planning a broad spectrum of Adult Religious Education programs starting this fall to both serve your members and attract those people who consider themselves “spiritual but not religious.”

Growing your church will affect every team and group and individual in the church. If growing this church is your goal, what are you willing to do in order to make that happen? Something that you dearly love, as an individual, may need to be transformed into something different to create that new quilt for everyone.

As your interim minister, it is part of my job to look for “stuck places” in the church. Two areas where I have encountered the most resistance are spoken Joys and Sorrows during the worship service, and those Ultimacy and

Intimacy groups, U&I, that continue in perpetuity with the same members. (I know that is not all your U&I groups.)

If you commit to growing, and the transformation that is necessary to achieve that, then I'll be working with the worship team and caring team to find a different way for the vital information of Joys and Sorrows to be conveyed. One of the many good reasons for this is that the worship service is supposed to serve the entire congregation. The bigger you get, the more important this is. The more time you spend focusing on individuals during the service, the less time there is for depth in the sermons.

If you commit to growing, and the transformation that is necessary to achieve that, I will ask those U&I groups that go on for years with the same members, to consider changing groups at the end of each year's time. The reason for this is that those closed groups convey a sense of being outside an inner circle to newcomers. I have heard from a new member that you do a very good job of welcoming newcomers, and a poor job of integrating them. This is part, only a part, of that problem.

I know that those groups whose members have been meeting for years are very close, and those relationships are important to you. I am not suggesting that you give up those relationships. People who are your dear friends will continue to be your dear friends. But what happens in a church where those intimate groups reform every year with different people, is this. You start with a number of closed circles. Those are your different small groups. Then, the next year, those groups reform. Newcomers are added. You maintain the closeness with your original group, but your circles expand. The next year, you're in a different group, perhaps with some people you have met with in the past, and you become close to those people. Each year, the circles become larger and more interconnected. And the feeling in the church transforms from tight little closed groups to openness, expansiveness, welcome. Please believe me, it makes a palpable difference to newcomers.

But let's be very clear. This is not a change I am requiring of you. It is something I am asking you to seriously consider. Only you can make the transformations that will lead to that harmonic convergence.

The Publicity Team is already working on an updated website for the church, with easier access, more photos and links. They know that most people today check out a church website before they visit the church. Those

people need to know that your church is relevant to their life in the 21st century.

If you want to grow as a church, it will be vital for you to trust and empower your leaders to lead you. That is what leaders are supposed to do – lead. So long as the Board and all your teams are serving the mission of the church, let them do their jobs. They are working for you, collectively, as a church, and attempting to nurture that loving, respectful, religious community.

Every team will need to consider what it can do to contribute to growth and vitality. I have some ideas about some of this, but many more answers will arise out of your own intuition and brainstorming.

You have a wonderful inheritance at High Plains Church. You were started by dedicated people, committed to doing what needed to be done to help this church and its message thrive. What needs to be done simply changes over time.

Nothing is going to happen all at once, whatever you decide next week. This month, Soul Matters and themed worship will ask you to consider what is most valuable to you in your inheritance. Next month, the theme will be Story. What are the stories that nurture and sustain you? What stories need to change? In August the theme is Possibility, and you'll be asked to imagine what is really possible for you and for your church. September's theme is Connection, and you'll be strengthening those connections that are most valuable to you, and looking at where else you'd like to be connected. October's theme is Transformation. What are you ready and willing to transform? How will you make that happen? November's theme is yearning. We'll look at what you yearn for most – things that were part of the past, and those that are yet to come. December's theme is Wonder. What does it mean to live a life of wonder? What wonderful things can happen when you do? That's as far as the worship team has planned out the themes. We'll have to look at what's happening in the congregation, what's needed to achieve your goals, before we know the next steps.

When someone is planning a quilt, they have to think about the whole project. How big a quilt? Who is it for? Are you going to reuse old clothing, or use only new fabric? Will you buy it or ask your friends for their leftovers? What patterns will you use? Are you going to make your own or use something already created? What colors do you want? How

thick a stuffing do you want? Will the fabric on the back be the same as something on the front? Will you hand quilt it, or use a machine? Some of these questions need to be decided in advance, and some of them can be figured out along the way.

Now is the time to examine all the dresses and aprons, shirts and shawls that make up the beloved community of High Plains Church, and think about how to turn them into a beautiful, large, warm, comforting, and inspirational quilt.