

“This Is Not My Church”
Mt. Diablo Unitarian Universalist Church
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Rev. David Takahashi Morris

When I go to church I want to be comfortable; I’m just not comfortable any more.

David Eaton’s church member wasn’t a newcomer. When All Souls in Washington, D.C. decided in the 1950’s to make a conscious, long-term effort to attract African American members she had probably voted for it. Now that it’s really happening, she isn’t comfortable. She’ll just stay in the suburbs and write checks for the worthy cause of integrating somebody else’s church. All Souls is not her church any more.

Can you imagine your way into what she’s feeling, as she shares her feelings with her minister? She faces the loss of friends and connections that she’s had for years; most painful of all, the surrender of her ideals. I’m struck by the desolation she must feel as she tells him: This is not my church any more.

A church becomes “mine” in many ways. Maybe you remember what did it for you, if you feel that way about this church, or if you’ve felt that way about another. Perhaps, like so many of us, you walked into this place, or your first Unitarian Universalist congregation somewhere else, and discovered a religious home when you thought there was no such thing for you. That was my experience, going for the first time to the U.U. Church of Charlotte, North Carolina. I realized, “These people believe what I believe. They work for causes that are important to me. This is a religion that honors humankind, justice, and this life. This is my kind of place.”

Maybe something like that made this your church.

There are other ways. The writer Anne Lamott often mentions in her essays the small, poor, urban church of which she is one of two white members. She’s astonished that she, a cynical, ultra-liberal, highly non-traditional white intellectual, has found herself deeply committed to a fervent black Evangelical community. But it is her church.

“I wandered in one day the year before I stopped drinking,” she writes. “I got into the habit of stopping by the church on Sundays. . . and leaving before the service was over because I didn’t want people to touch me, or hug me, or try to make me feel better about myself.”

Three years later, now clean and sober, Lamott introduced her newborn son to her church. “I tried to stammer, ‘this is my son,’” she says, “but my lip was trembling, my whole face was trembling, and everyone was crying. When I’d first started coming to the church, I couldn’t even stand up for half the songs because I’d be so sick from cocaine and alcohol that my head would be spinning, but these people were so confused that they’d thought I was a child of God.”

The Christianity of her church is important to Lamott, but it is not hers because of its beliefs or its good work in the city. It’s hers because she is accepted. It’s hers because learning to see herself through the eyes of these people as someone worthy of love and respect saved her life.

Perhaps something like that made this your church.

For many of us, being “at home” in a church is a subtle, almost subconscious response to things like music, the style and subject matter of the services, the physical spaces, the ways the community has of being together. We know what to expect; we understand how things are done. We feel comfortable among people whose lives are like our own, whose tastes and ways of expressing themselves are similar to ours.

It’s easy to look back at David Eaton’s uncomfortable church member from the distance of 40 years, and condemn her for being unable to live with the results of her own ideals. Yet for Eaton, this memory is “wonderful and beautiful.” This woman, he says, was honest. Many in his congregation were thinking the same thing, but they wouldn’t say so directly; instead they quietly disappeared—or they stayed and resisted indirectly, by questioning his leadership, complaining about minor changes, or trying to block new initiatives.

It’s easy to find fault. But Eaton’s story reaches across four decades and challenges me to ask: What is my threshold of comfort? Is there something, some development or change or loss that would make me look around and say, “This is not my church?” What about you? I can’t help but wonder where our threshold of comfort is.

If our music were mostly gospel, or jazz, or adult alternative, would this still be your church? If I were expected to preach U.U. Christianity, materialist atheism, or Buddhist self-transcendence as often as my own naturalistic rational faith, would this still be my church? Is it more my church if services are a place for adults and a few very quiet children, or if the sound of restless children is a normal, expected part of every Sunday? If we were a congregation that clapped and laughed and said “amen” or “that’s right” would you feel at home? Would it stop being my church if we danced sometimes? Would it still be your church if Leslie and I wore our robes for ceremonial occasions like Christmas, Water Ceremony, Child Dedications or New Member Recognitions?

What about the tougher questions raised by David Eaton’s story? MDUUC is more racially and ethnically diverse than many U.U. congregations. Yet I’m compelled to ask whether we, and I, are as honest about what makes us comfortable as Eaton’s church member was. Forty years later, does our congregational life fully reflect the diversity that is already here, let alone the multicultural world we are surrounded by? If they did, would this still be your church? What if you began feeling like a racial minority? If you’ve been feeling that way for years, do our worship services, our classes and community events, our efforts for social justice fully reflect your presence?

We acknowledged Transgender Awareness Day this morning; if you’re a person with a changed or changing sense or your gender identity, are you comfortable claiming that reality in your church? Would I feel at home if we were as public in our advocacy of transgender rights as we are for same-sex marriage? What if we were taking part in public actions on behalf of undocumented immigrants? Perhaps you have been waiting for years for us to embrace these causes, so that you might know this is truly your church.

If I have lost my job, if I’m losing my home, will I still have a home here? If I lose my self-respect, will my church help me find it again? Leslie noticed, reading a draft of this sermon, that I had made the common assumption that almost everyone here is more likely to hire a plumber

than to be one, more likely to teach at UC Berkeley than to do road construction there. If that assumption leaves you out, is your church a place where your whole life is welcomed and respected? If I don't like to read, if I think I might not make it through high school, is this my church? Would you feel comfortable knowing you were the only person in your row of seats without a college degree? Would you feel comfortable knowing you were the only person with one?

Are you comfortable right now? So what do we do? If our threshold of comfort is drawing near, you or I, what do we do?

There is a special challenge in our liberal religion: Our principles, our commitment to openness, our faith in inclusion are invitations to what I might dare to call a divine discomfort. Living in a genuinely diverse community means living with people whose lives are different from ours. That's the gift, and the challenge. It's not a crime or sin to want to be comfortable. The danger comes when our comfort is more important to us than keeping faith with the ties that bind us in a spiritual community that seeks to welcome all. When our comfortable, familiar sense of how things should be is shaken, we have choices. We can pretend it isn't so, or we can be honest about how we feel. We can decide it's "not my church anymore" and quietly walk away, or we can stay and resist; or we can find the courage to cross over our threshold of comfort and find the true power of belonging.

This is my church because I feel at home here, because I'm comfortable and know I belong. Yet as James Luther Adams says in our responsive reading, the church has a much greater purpose than to make me feel at home. The church exists to help us align ourselves with the sustaining and transforming power that is the ultimate source of existence, however each of us understands that power and that Source. The church exists so that we can release the immense energy of compassion and commitment among us by opening our real lives to one another; it exists to help us guide and shape the world toward a vision of just and compassionate community.

This is my church because here I am called to grow into my own best self. It is mine because the hurts of my days are known and comforted here, because I can bring my gifts and joys to be celebrated, and my pain and failures to be accepted and healed. It is my church because I find here a vision of what is possible for all of humankind, and because here I can learn how the small choices of my everyday life can bring me more into alignment with love, beauty, interconnection and creativity. It is my church because here I can discover what it means to be human.

If this is my church only because I am comfortable here, then I will experience every influx of newcomers, every change in the way we do things, as a threat. If this is my church because I am dedicated to its vision and purpose, I will still experience every change as a threat—it's not like I'll stop enjoying being comfortable!—but I will have a powerful incentive to stay, and the vision and purpose will be sources of courage to risk letting the changing church change me.

I won't have to give up being with like-minded people with similar experiences and lifestyles; in a growing and healthy church I'll surely find them. What I will have to give up is the idea that the whole church should reflect only my way of doing things, my theology or lack of it, my life experience, my tastes and preferences. What I will gain is the gift of a truly diverse community, where we are excited by what makes us different from each other. In such a community, we can

celebrate the many heritages and practices and customs we bring, just as we celebrate the common heritage of humanity and of faith we share. In such a community of courage, we will dare to honestly name and engage our differences and discomforts, knowing that this will bring us closer together as we seek creative ways to bridge the spaces between us.

This IS my church; it IS your church. But the church does not belong to us; we belong to the church. More accurately, we belong to each other. Each of us, you and I and every person who has ever walked through these doors and stayed, and every person who will do so in the future affect what happens here; we have and we will shape the church's life-story. And the church affects us; our life-story is shaped by what we encounter here.

We do not know where the story will lead us. We do know that the story, and the world, and we ourselves, will be the better and the richer if we continue on our way together in love, in truth, and in hope.