

## A LETTER TO MY CONGREGATION

A sermon by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
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Today marks the seventeenth anniversary of my ordination to the Unitarian Universalist ministry. I've been a minister of All Souls—mostly an associate minister—for sixteen and a half of those years. By the time another sixteen and a half years have passed, who knows: I may be stepping aside as my successor begins yet another chapter in the life of this historic congregation.

In any event, today could plausibly be the middle day of my ministry at All Souls—the end of the first half and the beginning of the second half. For you as members and friends of this congregation, this period of transition also marks an end and a beginning: the too-early end of Forrest's leadership and, in a new way, the beginning of mine. For the most part, we know where we've been over the past few decades and how we have come to this place. The question before us today concerns the future and whether we will move forward with deliberate intention and serious purpose.

As your minister, I wish to share with you this morning a few observations about our current circumstances and future prospects. In so doing, I wish to say what I believe is at stake in your vote on the strategic plan that has taken shape over the past two years. If today is your first visit to All Souls, much of what I will say applies equally well to other crossroads we may face in life, whether personal or institutional. Sometimes life gives us the opportunity to look ourselves full in the face and decide who we are and what we're committed to. For us at All Souls, today happens to be one of those times.

Nearly fifteen years have elapsed since the last time we engaged in a strategic planning process. The Futures Process, as it was called in 1994, came at a pivotal moment in the life of All Souls. The wounds from Forrest's then-recent divorce and remarriage had only begun to heal. Forrest's ministerial associate at the time, John Buehrens, had been engaged in a tightly contested race to become UUA President. John won the election in June 1993 and departed for Boston straightaway. I arrived to take John's place. It was time for the congregation to step back, take stock, and decide how to proceed.

The present vitality of All Souls stems, in part at least, from the wisdom you demonstrated as a congregation by taking time for assessment and planning during those challenging years. Led by Bill Bechman and the Futures Task Force, we conducted a survey, held focus groups, and convened action councils. The initiatives that emerged from that process included the Lifelines Center, which gave us a new forum for engaging with our community on broader religious, social and even political issues. We reconfigured the garden to make our sanctuary accessible to people unable to climb the steps, and we renovated Fellowship Hall—now Reidy Friendship Hall—to make it more flexible and more welcoming, not to mention cooler in the summer. We renewed our commitment to supporting our outreach programs and bolstered our efforts to welcome newcomers and new members. We raised our expectations for educating our children and youth, and we added new funding for our music at Easter and on Christmas Eve.

The Futures Process worked. It enabled us to move forward together. In so doing, the Futures Process helped fill out our covenant “to unite for the worship of God and the service of all.”

During the weeks leading up to your vote to call me as Senior Minister in February 2007, we held meetings and town hall dialogues. In those forums, some of you expressed the desire for a similar process of congregational assessment and planning during the ministerial transition from Forrest to me. I welcomed such a process, and the board set it in motion.

The planning process itself has been a labor of love. The Strategic Planning Team has been led with extraordinary diligence and patience by Melinda Beck and Carol Emmerling. More than 700 of you completed surveys; more than 200 of you participated in listening circles. Many dozens more attended dialogue sessions or emailed extensive comments. Two years later, we have a plan, and today we’ll vote on whether to affirm it.

Ironically, our present success as a congregation could lead us to become complacent and think we don’t need such a plan. All Souls today stands at a point of historic strength. Whatever metrics you apply, we generally measure up. Granted, there are areas within our life as a congregation that we can and should improve, but we do a lot of things well and some things magnificently. The quiet congregation that welcomed Forrest more than thirty years ago has become active and spirited. One would probably need to hearken back to the Civil War era and the ministry of Henry Whitney Bellows to find another era of similar vitality.

So why do we need to adopt a strategic plan? It’s true that such plans are often a sign of crisis, or an indication of uncertainty, or a signal that something isn’t working out. This certainly isn’t a crisis. Despite our collective grief at Forrest’s devastating three-year illness and recent death, almost all of us say All Souls is generally fine—and blessedly so. We want things to remain this way. Why not just continue doing what we’re already doing?

This question presumes a steady-state view of congregational life: if we keep doing what we’re doing, everything will stay fine. But this view contains both a logical and a theological fallacy. The logical fallacy is the assumption that the future will be like the present, and so the same actions performed in the future will produce the same results. This is not the case. Our actions won’t produce the same results, because the future will be different from the present, and therefore our actions will need to be different in order to produce the same results.

The world is moving apace. The internet is radically changing how we communicate as individuals and socialize as groups. Religious fundamentalism is drastically revising how people understand the meaning of faith and the purpose of religious communities. The growing prevalence in America of people who are not of northern European descent—whites will be a minority in America within a few decades—is fundamentally reshaping our culture. In order for the things we value about All Souls today to remain vital in the future, we’ll need to adapt. As the poet once said, we move to keep things whole.

The theological fallacy in the steady-state view is the idea that things are now whole, and everything’s fine. Is everything fine? It depends who you are and what you need. What is our mission as a congregation? Whom are we called to serve? What is the

range of our responsibility? Are we here mainly to serve the needs of those of us who have already discovered All Souls and found here a place of social and spiritual comfort? Or does our sense of mission extend beyond these walls?

Clearly, our sense of mission as a congregation already extends beyond our own needs. Monday Night Hospitality, Friday Lunch Program, Booker T. Washington Learning Center, Girl Scouts, Navigators, Peace and Justice Task Force, Nuclear Disarmament Task Force, Heart & Soul Charitable Fund—I could go on. These are vital and effective programs, and we should be proud of the lives they have saved and the good they have done.

That said, are these programs sufficient? We have seen that our outreach programs engage a relatively small percentage of our congregation. We could do more—probably a lot more—to relieve the economic and educational disparities that doom so many people around us to lives of quiet desperation.

But I believe our mission extends even further. We also have a responsibility to respond as best we can to the religious crisis looming before us. Everywhere you look, religious fundamentalism is burgeoning. It's an emergent cancer that will bring increasingly severe political, economic, and religious devastation to our nation and our world. The only forces rising up in serious protest are the fundamentalists of the left. Their principle strategy is to argue, correctly but inadequately, that the religious fundamentalists are wrong about the nature of God, the meaning of revelation, and the purpose of history.

Even as fundamentalism flourishes, Unitarian Universalism withers. There are about as many Unitarian Universalists in our nation today as there were in 1961 when the Unitarians and the Universalists merged into one denomination. Over the same half century, the U.S. population has increased by more than fifty percent. Why have our numbers fallen so sharply, percentage-wise? I think the answer is quite simple.

We haven't clearly articulated what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. We haven't effectively spread the word. We haven't suitably described what it's like to be part of a community where you feel connected and nurtured and engaged. We haven't adequately reached out to people who might come to our congregations, but would come in different ways than we did, and for different reasons.

While fundamentalism flourishes and Unitarian Universalism withers, a third trend has emerged: spiritual hunger has deepened in our nation. People are more connected than ever, but also more lonely. They accomplish more, but with less satisfaction. They live more rapidly, but fewer experiences endure. They feel divided within themselves and isolated from other people. They feel lost and alone.

For what do they hunger? They long for a place where they can restore their sense of wholeness and regain their sense of purpose—a place like All Souls. Here, we gather to contemplate the mystery of God, interpret the wisdom of religion, and explore the insights of science. We make shared commitments and offer mutual support. Our purpose is to awaken our sense of the sacred and renew our resolve to transform ourselves and our world.

Overall, All Souls has done a respectable job—adequate in most areas and exemplary in a few—of satisfying the spiritual hunger of people who happen to find their way to us. We have the capacity, however, to respond with a larger sense of mission and a greater sense of urgency. We can do more.

Fortunately, we have examples to follow in our own history. During the Civil War, for example, All Souls was not content to minister to wounded soldiers who happened to live nearby. Led by Henry Whitney Bellows, the congregation's mission extended to all the wounded on both sides of the conflict. They convinced President Lincoln to establish the National Sanitary Commission, and Bellows and the congregation raised \$6 million—in the 1860's—to provide initial funding. After the war ended, the Sanitary Commission eventually became the American Red Cross.

I could tell a similar story about the prominent role All Souls played during the early days of the AIDS crisis. Our congregation's vitality in the past has derived from a capacious sense of mission. The same dynamic will determine our future.

This is a clarifying moment for us—a measure of whether we will sit back, satisfied with our standing and our circumstances, or step forward to meet the daunting religious challenges of our time. Make no mistake: the strategic plan we'll consider today doesn't describe the details of how we will respond to these challenges, or when, or with what. Instead, it is designed to unite our intention as a congregation and focus our purpose. My hope—indeed, my prayer—is that we will seize this opportunity to step forward.

I wish to close on a personal note. The anniversary of my ordination reminds me of my unbelievably good fortune as a minister. The past decade and a half have been an amazing adventure for me. I am deeply grateful to all of you for the opportunity you have given me to develop as a pastor and preacher, and as a scholar. I am also grateful to my colleagues on the staff, especially Forrest, who was my friend and mentor from the outset. I am grateful as well for the indispensable partnership of my wife Holly, and for my daughter Zoe, whose presence reminds me daily of our responsibility to the generations that come after us. For all this, I feel profoundly grateful. Thank you.

In many ways, however, the past now seems mostly prologue. This is our time to step forward. We have much work to do together.

Amen. I love you. And may God bless us all.