

“Aha!” & “Awe”: Movements of the Spirit in All Souls Unitarian Church of Tulsa from May 2008 – September 2012.

By: Reverend Marlin Lavanhar
For: Prairie Group 2012

All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa is dedicated to religion but not to a creed. **Neither upon itself nor upon its members does it impose a test of doctrinal formulas.** It regards love of God and humankind, and the perfecting of our spiritual natures to be the unchanging substance of religion and the essential gospel of Jesus. Consecrating itself to these principles **it aims at cultivating** reverence for truth, moral character and insight, helpfulness to humanity, and **the spirit of communion with the infinite. It welcomes into its worship and fellowship all who are in sympathy with a religion thus simple and free.**

- *Statement of Purpose*
(adopted in 1957 and printed on every order of service since, **emphasis mine**)

“An ‘**aha**’ moment is any sudden comprehension that allows you to see something in a different light. It could be a solution to a problem; it could be getting a joke or suddenly recognizing a face.”¹

- (psychologist) John Kounios

“**Aha!** can also be used, quite simply, when you finally think you know what life is about.”²

- Neil Simon

“**Awe** [is an] overwhelming and bewildering sense of connection with a startling universe that is usually far beyond the narrow band of our consciousness,”³

- (neuroscientist) Paul Pearsall

Awe enables us to see in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple, to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal.

- Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

PREAMBLE

If Unitarian Universalists (UU's) decide that we have a calling to provide a path within our churches to support former Pentecostals, Charismatics and Neo-Pentecostals to maintain their liturgical expression and reinterpret their theology, we could open our congregations to thousands or millions who are currently beyond our vision and reach. This formula of **NEO-PENTECOSTAL LITURGY + COVENANT** (instead of creed) has the ability to:

- 1) Liberate charismatics from oppressive religious ideologies and help heal the wounds left by the predominance of homophobia, misogyny and triumphalism that is often embedded in the theology of these communities. And,
- 2) Help UU's begin to heal the mind/body split that has been a dominant feature of modern Western religion and Unitarian Universalism.

Pentecostal styles of worship reach people from demographics and cultures that Unitarian Universalism (UUism) has not been very successful reaching. The following essay asserts that UUism possess a vitally important, life-affirming and liberating approach to religious life and theology. The primary question is whether we are called to offer this saving message beyond UUism's dominant preferred liturgical expression and therefore endeavor to expand our communities to include more people from more segments of the population. In this paper I use the experience of All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa from 2008-2012 to explore the possibilities and challenges of pursuing such a calling.

INTRODUCTION

In 2008, All Souls in Tulsa welcomed Bishop Carlton Pearson and his congregation of predominately African American Pentecostal universalists into its membership. The collaboration and community that has developed from this alliance raises questions about the possibilities of a truly multiracial, intercultural, worldwide expression of Unitarian Universalism. Even if a rapidly growing Neo-Pentecostal wing of the UU Church does not emerge in the future, this commingling of liturgical and religious cultures and peoples in Tulsa offers a number of important considerations, and even critiques, of our current concept of UUism and covenantal community. This paper offers highlights and low-points regarding what has been happening from 2008-2012 at All Souls in Tulsa and how it can inform and transform our faith and future.

BREAKTHROUGHS

Diversity:

There are two primary breakthroughs All Souls has experienced after launching a Contemporary service that combines elements of New Dimensions (neo-Pentecostal) liturgy with All Souls liturgy. First, we have grown in racial diversity, particularly among African Americans. We are attracting a younger demographic and many more Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people to this service. The racial diversity is no surprise since statistics show that the majority of black megachurches are neo-Pentecostal.⁴ Also, neo-Pentecostalism is the fastest-growing segment of Christianity among the black middle-class.⁵ Sociologist Lawrence Mamiya contends that “by 2050 half of all black Christians will have embraced some form of Pentecostalism”.⁶ In fact, “across the country, a growing number of educated, affluent blacks are turning back to the church and at the same time [in some neo-Pentecostal churches] are able to embrace both their African spirituality and a more intellectual approach to religion”.⁷ Many of All Souls’ new LGBT members come from Pentecostal or Charismatic backgrounds, and find that at All Souls they can not only worship in a way that is familiar and inspiring, but also in a community where they are celebrated rather than denigrated. The young people seem attracted to the amplified, rhythmic music, the diverse community, the highly participatory liturgy and the progressive message being offered.

Embodiment:

A second breakthrough includes the ways the Contemporary service adds an embodied and communal element to worship. UUist worship is traditionally intellectual and disembodied. In the Contemporary service people stand for an extended period of singing at the beginning of the service and are encouraged to clap, to raise their hands in the air, to turn and greet their neighbors with hugs and handshaking and to dance. Occasionally when a minister ascends the pulpit and says the first few powerful lines of a sermon, the musician, Pastor David Smith, spontaneously reprises a few cords of the previous song and the entire congregation instinctively jumps to their feet singing and dancing. There is a celebration and joy that people feel and create with their bodies.

Christian scholar Harvey Cox believes that part of Pentecostalism’s appeal is that it helps fill what he calls the “ecstasy deficit” in our postmodern world.⁸ He explains that, “people have had the emotion squeezed out of them by modernity’s demand for rationality and we’re looking for a way to be whole again; Pentecostalism is an answer to the problem.”⁹ Paul Alexander says that, “some moneyed, educated, and analytical

folks may be deprived of emotional freedom and suffer because of it.”¹⁰ That would explain the words of one older, longtime, Caucasian member of All Souls who attends the Contemporary service despite her Humanistic theology who said, “I attend this service and am thankful because I need more joy in my life.” And the 60 year old, Caucasian, professional, man who loves to dance during the singing and can often be seen crying during poignant moments in the sermon or music. There is a freedom to move one’s body and express in words and tears appreciation and sorrow.

CHALLENGES

Despite the opportunities, there have been a number of challenges and types of resistance. Before sharing some of the significant challenges, it is important to say that the vast majority of All Souls members supported this direction from the outset and despite many challenges the membership never wavered. Those in support have always numbered in the hundreds, while those who have opposed the changes could be counted in dozens. Nevertheless the opposition brought on by the new service was significant and some remains in 2012. The resistance is complex and the issues involved are multifaceted. There are legitimate concerns and loving, well-intentioned people on all sides. I have learned how important it is to unpack the complexity of people’s resistance and avoid labeling or oversimplifying anyone’s motives.

Concerns that were voiced included:

- Why are “we” changing to suit “them”?
- The new music is too loud or too Christian or too repetitive or all of the above!
- I came to All Souls to get away from this kind of worship.
- I always attend the 11:30 service, now I have to come at 10:00 if I want to worship in my preferred style. Why am I having to adapt?
- You [Marlin] are destroying my church and I didn’t get a vote.
- It’s clear from the music that these new members do not share “our” theology.
- I used to tell friends to come experience All Souls, but now I’d be embarrassed if my friends came and saw this new service with people clapping, raising their hands, singing to God and speaking back to the minister.

- You [Marlin] care more about these new members than about those of us who brought you here and who have supported you. Otherwise, why would you go so far to please them when so many of us are not happy.
- We welcome anyone to join our church of any background, as long as they like the way we do things. We can't change who we are to attract every group. Otherwise we lack integrity and identity.
- We are trying to be something we are not in order to achieve the goal of racial diversity and it does not feel authentic.

Some pledges were withheld and reduced. Some prominent members resigned. There were movements in year one by people who did not like the changes to call for a vote or take a survey to determine whether the congregation wanted to continue with the new service. At our all choir concerts at Christmas and spring, during the first couple of years, a few people walked out when the New Dimensions Chorale began to sing and others plugged their ears demonstratively due apparently to the volume of the electric music and grimaced disapprovingly in view of the singers who were performing. A person on our editorial board suggested we produce an article for our newsletter with one person making the case for the new service and one person making a case against it. The well-intentioned editor thought it sounded fair, but did not consider the impact on new members reading an article outlining all the reasons that the worship they cherished and the changes brought on by their participation were disliked and seen by some as inappropriate. Some members complained that the Associate Minister was “Not conducting herself in a way becoming of an All Souls minister” because she occasionally clapped with enthusiasm and raised her hands during the singing while she was on the chancel leading the Contemporary service. Influential members made it known that they were considering leaving or seeing if they could have me leave if I could not turn back the clock on the changes. As predicted, some lead donors to the upcoming Capital Campaign who had already identified themselves as such, said they were now waiting to see what happens to the church before they commit to contribute to the campaign.

In the meantime, scores of former New Dimension members were leaving All Souls for a combination of reasons including some of the issues described above, but more often the stated or implicit reasons were because:

- 1) There was not enough Jesus in the music or messages;
- 2) The service did not rise to the emotional/ spiritual pitch that they were accustomed to and looking for;

- 3) There was an out lesbian minister in leadership;
- 4) Sermons were more information than application;
- 5) There were frequent references to pro-choice or pro-LGBT issues;
- 6) It was noticeably an upper-middle class, Caucasian organizational milieu and many throughout the church membership did not have a well-informed analysis of race or understanding of white privilege;
- 7) At All Souls African Americans and Christians were minorities and if they were a minority all week long, they did not want to be one in church.

Theological Challenges:

All Souls' by-laws, sermons and weekly orders of service state unequivocally that there is no test of creed or belief, and that anyone who agrees to our covenant is welcome to be a member regardless of belief. Yet, in practice, many people with Christian beliefs were not made to feel welcome and people who talked of loving Jesus and praising God were treated as outsiders. Examples include irreverent jokes, insulting to Christians and disrespectful of the Bible and Christianity, were somewhat common and considered appropriate among our church members at coffee hour, on Facebook and around church. Also, the New Dimensions Chorale was asked to lead songs that praise God, but not Jesus as God. Fortunately there are many Pentecostal songs that do not refer directly to Jesus. However, the experience led many to believe that Jesus is not welcome at All Souls and therefore Jesus-lovers were not welcome either. Long-established members said, "**All** we ever hear about in the sermons anymore is the Bible and Jesus." While despite it being the same sermon in each service, former New Dimension members frequently complained, "We almost **never** hear about Jesus or the Bible in this church."

Freedom & Our Invisible Culture:

UU's pride ourselves on being a bastion of religious freedom, but suddenly when people came to us who wanted to raise their hands and clap while singing or respond to the ministers while preaching it was sometimes expressed by long time members "That's not how we do things here." It was eye-opening to realize that the members of New Dimensions were freer in their religious life before they came to All Souls. They could sing to Jesus, they could stand at anytime during the service if moved, they could speak in tongues if inspired. Ours was primarily an intellectual freedom, but along with it there were a myriad of tacit rules of behavior that only became articulated when certain invisible lines were crossed.

Class:

Social class differences also arose. Anything that hinted at Holy Rollerism was denounced by some as emotionalism and primitivistic and the religion of the poor and uneducated. Some literally said they “were embarrassed to be associated with a church where people acted and worshiped with hands in the air and shouting amen.” In an interesting reversal, many among the professional class, particularly men under 65, like to dress down on Sundays. Many of them must wear a suit all week and so on Sunday they like to express a different, less formal side. Among some in a growing number of working class members, Sunday is seen as an opportunity to depart with jeans and work uniforms and dress elegantly. Also, some members who were struggling to make it financially were more interested in sermons that were practical in ways that would help them make it through another week. Yet, when sermons offered more practical application and less theoretical and abstract concepts, some longtime members complained that it seemed we were “dumbing down” the sermons.

Race & Ethnicity:

The changes required understanding and managing many levels of socio-cultural complexity. Issues included culture, theology, sexual orientation, class, generational differences, education levels, socio-political issues and race. Race stood out as the most complicated and painful. Caucasian members were often afraid of being perceived as racist and it was common for people of color to perceive race prejudice as the primary explanation for any resistance or concerns being expressed. Complaints from Caucasian members frequently began with, “This isn’t about race... this is about theology... or this is about the volume of the drumming ...or the repetitiveness of the music.” A fear of being labeled racist kept many people from speaking openly and this fear added to the intensity and fragility of many conversations within and about the church. All Souls also had no African Americans on staff or in leadership positions in the church when New Dimensions arrived.

Impact:

Despite the challenges, by the end of the first church year, the two worship services had almost equal attendance and we added a number of skilled and committed African American former members of New Dimensions to the church staff and lay committees. Demographically, the new service was different in being younger and racially diverse. We had retained about 70 members of former New Dimensions (about 25%) and had attracted numerous new members who were increasingly people of color and included a number of bi-racial couples and LGBT folks. Less than a dozen longtime members formally resigned, but there was a less quantifiable, quiet

attrition noticeable in reduced attendance and reductions in pledges. The leadership of the church was intentionally seeking out opportunities to grow in intercultural competency.

THE MISSION OF UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM

One day I met with a couple who were particularly upset by the Contemporary service. They had been in the church for over 30 years and were major financial leaders. They explained that they came to All Souls when they moved to Tulsa after college. They had been Presbyterians but had grown away from the creeds and theology. When they came to All Souls in the 70's they found a place that looked and felt much like the Presbyterian church, but with a message and worldview they could wholeheartedly embrace.

I explained that for the past 30 years the fastest growing religious expressions in America have been Charismatic, Pentecostal and Non-denominational churches with Contemporary styles of worship. Therefore, today, there are young people who, much like the couple I was talking to, no longer embrace the theology of the churches in which they were raised. Today, when these young people come into All Souls they have the same experience that this couple had 30 years ago. They find a service that feels like the church they loved growing up (e.g. Neo-Pentecostal) but it has a message and a worldview that they can wholeheartedly embrace. In essence, All Souls is doing exactly what it was doing in the 1970's, when they arrived, except now we are responding to the current religious environment by making room not only for those who are coming from Mainline denominations, but also for those who are fleeing more Charismatic congregations.

I explained that All Souls is offers a church and theology that is not homophobic or misogynistic or triumphalistic or anti-intellectual. The folks who are joining may enjoy clapping and praising God, but they do not take the Bible literally and do not think Christianity is the only true religion. They are people who believe it is important to incorporate reason and science and academic learning into one's religious life. They are looking for a religion that will allow them to bring their whole selves, including their questions, their sexual orientation and also their preferred style of music and worship. Is there any reason not to welcome and try to serve these people who share UUisms core values and vision for the world?

Imagine what it could mean if UUists saw one mission of UUism as providing a home for the millions of people who grew up Pentecostal, Charismatic and Non-denominational who no longer accept the dogmas, literalism, exclusiveness, homophobia and misogyny of many of those churches. We have been doing this for

mainline Christians for centuries. In the 21st century we live in a changed religious landscape. In order to continue to do what Unitarians and Universalists have historically been doing, in some ways since the 16th century (i.e. freeing people from dogmatic and oppressive religious creeds and perspectives) we will need to find ways to offer worship that inspires and engages people who prefer Charismatic, Contemporary Christian and embodied worship.

A PLACE FOR “AWE”

One of the reasons that Pentecostal Christianity is spreading to 100's of millions of people of many cultures is that there is what I call the Pentecostal Formula. Here's how it works. Sustained music, repetition, clapping, hand-waving and rhythms lead people to an experience of “awe”. People describe it as feeling touched or infused by the spirit and like an ecstatic moment of emotional or spiritual high. The awe is made even more powerful because it is communal and one has the feeling that they are sharing this ecstatic moment with others who are experiencing the same phenomenon. Although the experience is not sexual, it is analogous to sex in which two people share a sense of mutual ecstasy. In both experiences a sense of unity and oneness is created and the boundaries between “self” and “other” feel erased or diminished. Pentecostals have found a way through music and movement to reliably and repeatedly take people to a place of awe.

The Pentecostal Formula = Pentecostal Liturgy + Creed:

The Pentecostal Formula involves bringing people to a powerful existential moment and then framing what transpired by placing doctrines over what occurred. People who are positively affected by the experience, typically want to experience it (e.g. the power, the joy, the hope, the surrender, the communion, etc.) again. The people offering the worship know how to repeatedly and predictably bring people to those powerful existential moments and know how to offer an explanation that frames it. It is an epistemology. The awe is used as the proof that what is being said in the sermon and classes is true. In other words, the answer to the question, “How do we know that the theology and dogma are true and that the ministry is anointed by God?” is that people experience a profound, undeniable physical-emotional-spiritual moment while in church together. In some of these church's the proof is the gift of glossolalia, but more and more in neo-Pentecostal churches the traditional gifts of the spirit are becoming less and less important and significant. “[I]ncreasingly smaller numbers of Pentecostals have actually spoken in tongues, and many have never experienced the demonstration of the prophetic utterances and the miraculous healings that had characterized earlier Pentecostal meetings.”¹¹ The experience of high-energy worship (that leads people to both individual and communal feelings of joy and hope, despite

whatever is happening in their lives outside of worship) has gradually become a more common expression of anointed worship worldwide¹².

The theology and dogma that is offered as the frame is biblically literal and typically involves the claim that all people are convicted of sin and that Jesus Christ died for our sins and is the one and only savior and redeemer of humankind. Parenthetically, it also includes oppressive ideas about women and homosexuality and derogatory ideas about other faith traditions and worldviews.

As powerful and pervasive as this formula is at attracting and keeping members, few in liberal religion see it as a way to share their faith. What we have discovered at All Souls is that with the help of skillful music ministries and new ways of worshipping, we can take people to similar experiences of awe in worship. However, as UU's we do not place a dogmatic frame on top of the experience, instead we provide people with a hermeneutic of religious freedom to interpret these experiences for themselves. Since starting this new service many people have come to realize that their experience of the spirit, in these moments of awe in worship, are not necessarily tied to a Christian theology or to a particular dogma or even to Jesus Christ. Many have had the opportunity to reconsider their frame of reference since having the experience of awe in the context of worship that includes diverse names for God, expressions of Humanism and with an out lesbian minister leading the service. Such experiences in worship can help people begin to deconstruct the premise upon which they had been taught about faith, God and spirituality. The experience, and our church, are making room for new religious understandings to emerge.

AHA & AWE

The All Souls Worship Team asked, "What does success look like at our Traditional service in comparison to our Contemporary service?" We concluded, based on our experiences, that people come to worship for many reasons including social, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic longings. Nevertheless those attending our Traditional service often articulate a sense of satisfaction if they learned something. We have been calling it an "aha moment." When the service or sermon offers new insights, new perspectives on life or helps someone learn or articulate what they had been feeling or thinking, it is seen as successful. Even if a service has exquisite music, beautiful readings and community, if the service does not offer at least one "aha moment" with a new insight or fresh perspective it is often seen to have at least partially missed the mark.

In the Contemporary service, especially among attendees from Pentecostal backgrounds, success seems to involve feeling what some call "the indwelling of the

spirit” or “the anointing of God” or “a mystical communion with the infinite” or what I am calling generically “awe”. These worshippers also appreciate an intellectually satisfying sermon, but if the sermon was satisfying but there was no experience of awe, the service fell short. If a person came more than once and did not have an experience of awe either time, the worship team believes that no matter how brilliant the sermon might have been the person was not likely to come back. As one scholar of Pentecostalism put it, “No greater assessment could be made of a worship service than that the Holy Ghost ‘took control’”¹³ Another reflected, “...the single most important element that empowers Progressive Pentecostals, ...[is] unequivocally the energizing experience of worship.”¹⁴

We have also realize that at their best, each of our worship services offers people an experience of intellectual insight for the head (aha) as well as a feeling of connection to something larger than themselves in their heart (awe). Successful worship in general begins with people entering the sanctuary immersed in their individual story and their individual emotions. Then through the course of the liturgy they become connected to a larger story and purpose and what Thandeka calls people’s “raw emotions” are transformed into “religious emotions.”¹⁵ Every person enters worship filled with a combination of worries, wishes, desires, and fears with which they may or may not be able to completely feel or express. When worship is effective it is affective and thus it helps people move from feelings of alienation to belonging or from isolation to intimacy or from self-reference in which “self” means the person as an individual to self-reference in which “self” refers to a greater whole. On a good Sunday such movements of the heart and spirit happen at each service and the difference is more in regard to technique, style and intensity rather than it is in regard to outcome.¹⁶

HERMENEUTIC OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

UUists have a life-saving and liberating way of approaching the religious dimensions of being human. By using the Pentecostal Formula as a basis to create a UU Formula we can share our liberating faith with others. The Contemporary service at All Souls in one example. In many ways and many lands since the 16th Century, Unitarians have devoted themselves to sharing a hermeneutic of religious freedom. It is an interpretive model that believes God and truth do not need protection from our questions and doubts and that encourages people to forgo creeds and other dogmas that restrict the liberty of thought. Unitarians have applied this hermeneutic to the interpretation of the Bible, as well as to religious experience and the interpretation of other scriptures. Unitarian Universalism is fundamentally about liberating people from

oppressive religious structures and authorities and opening people to discover truth. UU's do this with an understanding that such liberation is essential to the creation of a just and equitable world and for the actualization of human potential.

What UUism has to offer Pentecostals:

There are many assets that a distinctly UU neo-Pentecostalism could offer. For example, the hermeneutic of religious freedom can allow Africans and African Americans to link their experiences of awe to distinctly African origins rather than having the experience interpreted and mediated through Christian and Western symbols and cultures. The same is true for people of other cultures who will be freed to interpret their experience of awe in worship in ways that reach beyond the limitations of Western Christian metaphors and dogmas. In other words, UUism can offer in worship what Bishop Pearson offered in his book, the awareness that "God is not a Christian..."¹⁷

Such an expression of UUism also offers a religious community for those who are seeking intellectually rigorous and religiously eclectic and anti-oppressive sermons in the context of embodied, energetic Pentecostal style worship. In the book Signs and Wonders the author tells the story of a freelance reporter who wished her Catholic church had just a smidgeon of Pentecostal joy, but she said she would not join a Pentecostal church because there was no substance to the sermon that followed the emotion and she was put off by the solution to many political and psychological problems being grounded in casting out demons.¹⁸ She was also afraid too many people in these churches are becoming addicted to emotion that titillates and entertains but does not offer anything of lasting value.¹⁹ Admittedly at times Pentecostalism around the world can seem like "nothing more than catharsis for the downtrodden... or like an opiate as in Marx's theory... and is certainly susceptible to self-interested manipulators and to escapism and fraud."²⁰ In the context of a UU form of neo-Pentecostalism one can imagine countering these shortcomings by building on UU traditions of democratic polity and congregational accountability, educated clergy, open discussion and debate and covenanted community.

What Pentecostalism has to offer UUism:

Intercultural Community

UU neo-Pentecostalism could help the UU faith to begin reaching people from cultures and demographics that have until this time been significantly absent from our congregations. At All Souls in Tulsa the influx of African Americans and, to a smaller extent, Asian and Hispanic Americans has enriched the life of our community with

remarkable new leaders, new ideas, broadened perspectives on issues of theology and the practice of religion. The rich presence of people from differing cultures and backgrounds has encouraged our church and its leaders to develop intercultural competencies and to see a significant aspect of our collective vocation as building an intercultural institution that can be a model of human understanding and inclusion.

Joy, Hope & Surrender

At the same time, the neo-Pentecostal influences in worship, and throughout the life of All Souls, has brought new expressions of joy and hope and possibility. For one thing, the celebratory aspects of worship are offering a potent salve for the wounds and bruises we pick up in our justice and outreach efforts. “The work of doing social ministry is not easy; it requires ministering to people who are often sick, despairing, and living on the margins of society.”²¹ Without a rich fountain of hope and a reliable source to tap into the sustaining spirit of joy, such work can become dreary and unsustainable. In my own ministry over the past four years there have been numerous weeks involving heartbreaking realities from informing young children of the death of their father to sitting with parents after the suicide of their son and with one young man after the senseless murder of his brother in a drive-by shooting. I have distinct memories of feeling my spirit held and lifted in Contemporary worship in ways that gave me the energy and enthusiasm to keep ministering and also to maintain my own sanity. In the case of the murdered brother, I recall watching the young man as he brought his grief into Contemporary worship for months afterward and how he opened to his emotions through song and sinew. Recently, when a church staff member was murdered and her son, another church staff member, stood accused of the murder, I witnessed the way that each of our three distinct worship styles offered something different as the congregation sought to find comfort and meaning in the unfathomable situation. After 46 hours of stress and sadness, it was while singing in the Contemporary service that I palpably recovered a transforming sense of joy and hope. After experiencing that profound awe in worship in the midst of deep grief, I had an aha. I came to understand even more how this neo-Pentecostal form of worship is a powerful religious tool for healing, meaning-making and restoration.

Institutionalized Transcendence:

UUism’s Transcendentalist heritage calls us to the direct experience of awe and wonder. Pentecostalism has created a reliable and repeatable way to bring people to such an experience in church and without having to necessarily climb to a mountaintop or live by a pond for two years. Pentecostal styles of worship offer an answer to one of the primary criticisms of Transcendentalism which is that it was not

supportive of churches and institutions. As one author put it, “Pentecostals have learned how to capture lightening in a bottle.”²² They know how to give people a direct experience of the holy, in church.

Defining the Limits of Corporate Worship

At All Souls another gift that has come from this encounter is that we have begun to offer smaller venues for in-depth spiritual practices. Sunday morning in corporate worship there are limitations because there is such a large cross-section of theologies represented. UU corporate worship often tries to accomplish too much (i.e. joys and concerns). All Souls has begun to use smaller settings and services to introduce additional spiritual practices and rituals that might not meet the corporate needs of the larger congregation. For example we have a monthly Friday night Praise and Worship Service led by Pastor David Smith that typically involves at least two hours of sustained Christian Praise singing and it is not unusual for people to weep, dance, testify to each other, cry-out or speak in tongues during parts of this smaller service. It also is not bound by time. I was interested to read in *Black Fire* that in a number of large Pentecostal churches around the country today speaking in tongues and other traditional gifts of the spirit were being relegated to smaller more intimate settings.²³ All Souls has also begun to offer a communion service outside of the primary Sunday morning worship services on certain occasions and a large selection of meditative and other spiritual practices. These opportunities allow people to experience full expression of their individual spiritual practice and theology while also gathering the congregation together in corporate worship.²⁴ The combination of corporate worship and smaller venues for particular worship and practices could dramatically expand UUism's reach.

CONCLUSION

Unitarian Universalism has a life-saving and liberating set of values and a transformative way of approaching the religious dimensions of being human. I believe we can use the Pentecostal Formula as a basis to create a UU Formula. The UU Formula would take much of what is powerful and beautiful and life-giving about neo-Pentecostal worship and yoke it to that which is liberating about UUism. If we are successful, it is conceivable that we could reach people in demographics far beyond any we have touched before. We could even create an intercultural religious movement that reaches across cultures and continents and has the power to shape the cultures and communities it reaches. Can you imagine counties, countries and continents that are filled in some significant ways with people who share our values of human understanding and dignity? What might that do to the body politics in those places? What might that do to spread a vision of peace and justice for all?

AFTERWORD

The Story Continues:

At All Souls in Tulsa as we began year four of this journey, one of our longest tenured families offered to buy the congregation an entire city block in downtown Tulsa to build a new church. Such a move means leaving a wealthy, predominately white neighborhood of Tulsa that mirrors the historic demographic of the congregation and entering the heart of the city's urban center. The new location will make the church much more accessible to people of all parts of Tulsa and from all walks of life. Building a new larger church, will also allow the congregation to create worship spaces that can more effectively accommodate the many forms of worship now occurring. It will also bring together the congregation that has existed since 2008 and allow US to build this new building together. A church that "we" built. In the largest congregational meeting ever held in the church's history the congregation voted overwhelmingly to accept the land and move. The decision was seen as a strong endorsement of the direction of the church and the vision of becoming a truly intercultural congregation.

In an effort to sustain and expand what is happening at All Souls, the church kicked off year five, in September 2012, with the worship team adding a Humanist service on Sunday mornings at 8:30 AM. On Homecoming Sunday 2012 there was an average of 280 adults in each of the three services and attendance that day and so far this fall has been fairly evenly spread out among the three styles of worship from Humanist to Contemporary. On Sunday mornings we begin with a service that does not mention God or scripture and has jazz and other secular styles of instrumental music and we end with a service that includes unconstrained praising of God, singing to God and regular references to the Bible. In each service the congregation recites and affirms the church's covenant and the members of the three worshipping communities interact through classes, programs, small groups, events, ordinations and installations, committees and our work in the wider community.

As we journey forward through the ages toward our Centennial year in 2021, All Souls in Tulsa is united around our vision which is beautifully displayed along with the congregations signatures in our main foyer. The vision begins:

Our church is an embodiment and celebration of the world as we hope it will one day become. A climate of profound hospitality, love and acceptance radiates from our campus and our members. Our sanctuary is bursting with people from a diversity of theologies, philosophies, ethnicities, cultures, colors, classes, abilities, generations, sexual

orientations and political persuasions, all dwelling together in peace, seeking the truth in love and helping one another.

Incidentally, 2021 is also the anniversary of the worst Race Riot in America's history which was in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The racial divide in our city has been deep and wide. Our congregation's commitment to being a source of unity, healing and restoration has been ongoing for decades. My predecessor (and Prairie Group member) Dr. John Wolf exemplified this commitment in his role as a city leader during the time of the civil-rights struggles for racial integration and in the establishment of the intentionally multiracial UU Church of the Restoration in the Greenwood District where the riot occurred. Colleagues such as Rev. Yielbonzie Charles Johnson and Rev. Gerald Davis and others have built and worked to sustain that significant effort. Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed recounts that on the evening before the installation of Rev. Johnson in 1987 as the first minister of the Church of the Restoration UU, he and Rev. Marjorie Bowens Wheatly and others discussed late into the night what a Pentecostal UU church might look like and what it could do for the complexion and direction of our tradition. A Pentecostal might say, "these ministers prophesied that possibility and spoke it into the life of the city of Tulsa and ultimately into the life of UUism in America."

At the centennial of All Souls (2021) which coincides with the centennial of the Tulsa Race Riot we envision our church being a powerful beacon of racial reconciliation and understanding in our city. It is hard to imagine the congregation becoming the multiracial and intercultural congregation it is becoming without the involvement and influence of Bishop Pearson, Pastor David Smith, Randy Lewis, Nicole Ogundare and the members, staff and chorale of his former congregation. In other words, it is hard to imagine this trajectory without the development of a Pentecostal inspired contemporary worship service.

¹ On Aha and Senior Moments" William Saffire
July 5, 2009, on page MM18 of the New York edition of the New York Times Newspaper.

² Ibid.

³ Joseph A. Lipari (09/01/2007). "Editorial Review". *Library Journal* (Central Clinic, Cincinnati) 132 (14): 152.

⁴ Alexander, Estrelida Y. Black Fire: One Hundred Years of African American Pentecostalism InterVarsity Press, Illinois 2011. p. 25.

⁵ Ibid. 288.

⁶ Ibid. 288.

⁷ Ibid. 398.

⁸ Cox, Harvey, Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the 21st Century. Boston, Addison-Wesley, 1995, p. 86.

⁹ Alexander, Paul. Signs and Wonders: Why Pentecostalism is the World's Fastest Growing Faith. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009. p 147.

¹⁰ Ibid. p 147.

¹¹ Alexander, Estrela Y. Black Fire: One Hundred Years of African American Pentecostalism InterVarsity Press, Illinois 2011. p. 384

¹² Miller, Donald. E., and Tetsunao Yamamori. Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007 Kindle Edition. 2630 of 3002

¹³ Alexander, Estrela Y. Black Fire: One Hundred Years of African American Pentecostalism InterVarsity Press, Illinois 2011. p. 57

¹⁴ Miller, Donald. E., and Tetsunao Yamamori. Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007 Kindle Edition. 2628 of 3002.

¹⁵ From conversations about worship with Thandeka at Prairie Group 2010.

¹⁶ The level of surrender or giving oneself over to the occasion is one of the major differences in intensity. In our Contemporary service it begins for most people with obeying the instruction to turn to the person next to you and share a greeting or a blessing. For some, it continues with a greater surrender to feelings, thoughts and to what many describe as the power of the Spirit. In Traditional UU worship, the instruction to stand for singing is often said, "...as you are willing and able." This is a low expectation of surrender. Nevertheless, through the rituals of singing, standing for benedictions and responsive readings, the Traditional service also asks people to surrender to the liturgy and this is similar, even if it is much less intense.

¹⁷ Pearson, Carlton. God Is Not A Christian, Nor A Jew, Muslim, Hindu... Atria Books, New York 2010.

¹⁸ Alexander, Paul. Signs and Wonders: Why Pentecostalism is the World's Fastest Growing Faith. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009. p.145

¹⁹ Ibid. 145.

²⁰ Miller, Donald. E., and Tetsunao Yamamori. Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007 Kindle Edition. 2668 of 3002.

²¹ Ibid. 2630 of 3002.

²² Grant Wacker, Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture, Harvard University

Press, 2001. P. 212.

²³ Alexander, Estrela Y. Black Fire: One Hundred Years of African American Pentecostalism InterVarsity Press, Illinois 2011. p. 385.

²⁴ In 2012 All Souls in Tulsa also began to divide its large corporate worship into three different liturgical styles as well as three theological emphases. The theologies offered are Humanist, Transcendentalist and Christian. Each service is coupled with a distinct liturgy. This change allows more options to meet more members corporate worship needs.