

“A SATELLITE? IN OSHKOSH? NOW?”

**A sermon by the Rev. Roger Bertschausen
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Call to Gather from Theodore Parker

Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere;
its temple, all space
its shrine, the good heart;
its creed, all truth;
its ritual, works of love;
its profession of faith, divine living.¹

Reading: “We Arrive Out of Many Singular Rooms” by Kenneth L. Patton

We arrive out of many singular rooms, walking over the branching streets.

We come to be assured that brothers and sisters surround us, to restore their images on our eyes.

We enlarge our voices in common speaking and singing.

We try again that solitude found in the midst of those who with us seek their hidden reckonings.

Our eyes reclaim the remembered faces; their voices stir the surrounding air.

The warmth of their hands assures us, and the gladness of our spoken names.

This is the reason of cities, of homes, of assemblies in the houses of worship.

It is good to be with one another.²

Sermon

When I look into the crystal ball at the Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship ten years from now, here's what I see: we will be ONE congregation in TWO thriving locations. I see a building addition here so we are better able to welcome people of all ages from the Fox Cities (and beyond). And I see a place (owned or, more likely, rented) in Oshkosh which will welcome people of all ages from the Oshkosh area, the southern Fox Cities and beyond. With two sites in the Fox Valley, we will truly live up to our name: **Fox Valley** UU Fellowship. One staff will serve both sites. There will be one

¹ Reading #683 in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

² Reading #443 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

budget and one governing board.³ Ten years from now, we will have stopped using “satellite” to describe the Oshkosh site and instead call it “FVUUF—Oshkosh campus” (and this: “FVUUF—Fox Cities campus”). Programs and activities in each place will be so compelling and inviting that Fox Cities people occasionally will travel down to our Oshkosh site, and Oshkosh people will occasionally travel up to our Fox Cities location. Walk into either site, and you’ll feel a palpable sense of welcome, vitality, inclusiveness and energy. Both will feel like home.

I’ll address the three questions in the title of my sermon one by one. My first question is: A satellite? Should we create a second site and become a multi-site congregation. My answer, as the vision I just shared indicates, is a resounding yes!

What are the advantages of having a multi-site congregation? Most importantly, the Fellowship will be more accessible—in this case to Unitarian Universalists and potential UUs in the Oshkosh area. The city of Oshkosh has a population of 65,000, with at least that many more in the surrounding Oshkosh metropolitan area. I tip my hat to the seventy-five members and friends of our Fellowship who travel here from Oshkosh. They drive a half hour or more through more than occasional bad weather and an often congested highway 41 to get here. Having a Fellowship site closer to them will save them time and money and will be better for the environment. And it will make Unitarian Universalism an attractive option for a whole lot of Oshkosh people who wouldn’t consider driving up here to check out a church. Demographers tell us that there could be a thousand potential UUs in the Oshkosh area. Oshkosh is one of the two largest cities in Wisconsin without a UU congregation. (The other is Waukesha, which is located closer to two neighboring UU congregations than Oshkosh is to here.) It would be good for Unitarian Universalism—and, more importantly, good for these potential UU’s in Oshkosh—if they had good local option to check out.

But why start a satellite rather than a new congregation independent from FVUUF in Oshkosh? Well, I believe that there are several significant advantages to the satellite model. Most notably, a satellite can get off to a much quicker start than a brand new congregation because it has access to the resources and staff of an existing congregation. For generations, starting new, independent congregations has been the preferred model for growth in the UU Association. A group of people comes together and launches a congregation, or a group leaves an existing congregation (with or without a blessing) and starts a new one. Then the new start limps along for twenty-five years or thirty-five or forever. The people may have a lot of enthusiasm and dedication, but they don’t have much money or staff or infrastructure to launch things (relatively) quickly.

This Fellowship is a case in point. For twenty-five plus years we struggled along without staff and without enough resources to do much else besides offering services and religious education. The congregation skipped around from one rental location to another. Near the end of this period, an exhausted and dispirited membership voted to disband our RE program, and most weeks fewer than ten adults showed up for the service. Many leaders had long ago burned out and departed. The fact the Fellowship even survived this period is nothing short of a miracle. Interestingly, a fellowship that

³ Scott McConnell, *Multi-Site Churches: Guidance for the Movement’s Next Generation* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2009), pp. 74-75; Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon and Warren Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One Church...in Many Locations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), p. 18.

started at the same time in Oshkosh did not ultimately survive the elongated start-up period. I think it's time to try a different model!

Creating a second site is no easy task, either, but the support and the resources of the existing congregation make a difference. Lots of wheels don't have to be reinvented. There is an efficiency of administration—for example, there can be one administrative office, one financial system, one set of policies and procedures.⁴ More significantly, the satellite has the advantage of the deep root system the existing congregation has developed over time. This is really important, especially since the Fellowship has strong and healthy roots.

The second question in my sermon title is “In Oshkosh?” Is Oshkosh the place to start a satellite? My answer here again is a resounding yes. Not only does Oshkosh have a very significant population base and no UU congregation, but many of our members and friends from Oshkosh have repeatedly voiced the dream of having a Fellowship site there. The high interest in this has been confirmed by a large turn-out at our initial planning meetings: something like forty of our Oshkosh members and friends have participated in the meetings. Additionally, our launch of a campus ministry last fall at UW-Oshkosh makes Oshkosh an ideal Fox Valley location for a satellite. A vibrant campus ministry inevitably results in increased student visits to the sponsoring congregation. We've seen that here this year with students from our Lawrence University campus ministry. But this doesn't happen if the sponsoring congregation is too far away. Offering services and programs in Oshkosh will do a lot to anchor our campus ministry effort there.

In an important book called *The Multi-site Revolution*, the authors assert that a congregation needs to ask itself two key questions in determining the location of a second site: 1) Are there people in the targeted area with a connection to the congregation? And 2) Is there a need in the community for a congregation like ours?⁵ The answer to both of these questions is yes. Clearly we have a substantial number of people already connected to our Fellowship in Oshkosh. And to me, there surely is a need for Unitarian Universalism in Oshkosh. This is certainly what we hear from our Oshkosh members. Like the Fox Cities, Oshkosh is a religiously conservative area. Unlike a big city or a progressive middle-sized city like Madison, there are not very many mainline Christian or Jewish congregations which could be considered liberal. And there is no congregation which has anywhere near the theological breadth of the Fellowship. As Dottie Mathews said last week, Unitarian Universalism has an important message for our hurting and divided world. Oshkosh needs this message—especially as it continues to work through the opportunities and challenges of growing diversity.

And the third question in my sermon title is “Now?” Is this the time to start a satellite in Oshkosh? To this, I offer a mixed answer. Ours is a healthy and vibrant congregation—and these are two prerequisites for adding a second site. And the need is there. But honestly, at this moment we lack the membership and budget size to sustain a full-fledged second site that looks anything like the vision with which I opened the sermon. Furthermore, we don't have the staffing level to support a full-fledged two-site congregation. A full-fledged second campus requires a lot of additional staff work—and our staff is already stretched pretty far.

⁴ Surratt et al., p. 51.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

And of course the economic meltdown (or, as I heard it called this week, “the Great Recession”) doesn’t help matters. It looks like our budget for the next fiscal year (starting July 1) will be about the same as this year. Given the economy, we are actually very pleased about this—we have heard lots of stories of UU and other congregations which have had to cut budgets, compensation, benefits and even staff positions. Our UU Association stewardship campaign consultant recently e-mailed us to ask how much less in pledges we collected. This is how commonplace a shrinking financial base is this year: she assumed that we would be in the same boat. When we reported that actually we weren’t going to have a smaller budget, she replied that we should be ecstatic. It is a fantastic outcome given the economy. It’s a tribute to the devotion of all of you. In our stewardship sermon, Dottie and I acknowledged that some people would understandably need to cut or eliminate their pledge because of the economy. To pick up the resulting slack, we asked those of you who were able to increase to consider doing so. Thankfully many of you responded to this call. But the reality is that a flat budget obviously doesn’t give us much money to work with in starting a satellite.

A strategic planning committee of several of our Oshkosh members worked through all of this and concluded that given the financial and staffing constraints at this time, our best course of action is to take some very small steps forward over the next year. I’ll be honest: these steps are much more modest than I envisioned a year ago or six months or even one month ago. I was surprised where the committee ended up. But I am persuaded that the recommendations chart a very wise approach that will help ensure long-term success. (These recommendations can be found on our website.)

Because a sense of community is central to the long-term success of a satellite, the committee focused its proposal on the goal of community-building. The proposal for this next year has four parts:

- 1) Offer a high quality, once-a-month Wednesday evening program for all ages in Oshkosh. The program could begin with a pot-luck or catered dinner. Like Fellowship Wednesdays here, it could include educational programs for adults and children as well as child-care for little ones. The program could also include a short intergenerational worship service. Hopefully some Fellowship people from beyond Oshkosh will find the programming so inviting that they will attend, too.
- 2) Become more intentional about integrating Oshkosh people and concerns into Fellowship programming. For instance, we could make it a goal to regularly offer Circle Dinners in Oshkosh, create additional covenant groups there (we have one now), and focus some of our social action programming on issues relevant to Oshkosh.
- 3) Develop a stronger presence in the Oshkosh community, for example, through participation of lay ministers or Dottie or myself in interfaith activities. Another vehicle for this could be offering occasional higher profile programs on campus.
- 4) Develop our carpooling network so that it is easier, more economical and more environmentally friendly for Oshkosh area UU’s to travel to this site for services and programs.

I should add that some of you no doubt are aware that there had been conversation about having worship services in Oshkosh led by lay ministers which would include sermons on DVD from here. That may or may not come later, but it's not in the plan for next year.

So would this proposal approximate the vision of one congregation in two sites that I shared at the start of the sermon? No. Not even close. But it would be a good start. It would begin the work of building a solid foundation for the vision I shared. So start a satellite now? Yes, but let's start it with baby steps.

I should note that this careful approach fits perfectly into the philosophy that has served the Fellowship extraordinarily well for many years: dream big and plan carefully. We dream big and then together we plan for and take each small step toward realizing our dream. No doubt about it: a multi-site congregation is a big dream. If we succeed, we will be the first UU congregation in the Midwest to be multi-site. And certainly these first baby steps are emblematic of planning carefully. I should also add that with this approach we are following the advice of multi-site experts: they advise taking low-risk, baby steps at first.⁶

What are the keys to making a multi-site congregation work? I come up with three keys, all of which are really variations on a theme.

First and most importantly, we need to relentlessly keep at the forefront the concept of "ONE congregation, TWO sites." The satellite in Oshkosh must be as thoroughly a part of the Fox Valley UU Fellowship as this site. Any hint of "us" and "them" and this project will be doomed—and the health of the whole Fellowship will be in serious jeopardy. Devolving into an "us" versus "them" mentality is the biggest risk of becoming a multi-site congregation.

Multi-site experts talk about the need for additional sites to have the same "DNA" as the first. So everything in Oshkosh will need to embody the same identity, vision and values as here. Indeed, this is precisely what our Oshkosh members want: they love it here; they just want "this" closer to home. So anything contrary to the Fellowship's DNA in Oshkosh will need to be rejected. Of course our identity, vision and values will be expressed in different ways—for example, a rented space would feel different from this space. But the core has to be the same. Walk in an Oshkosh site as a first-time visitor or as a fifty-four year member, and you should feel the same energy, vitality, inclusiveness, and health as when you walk in here. Furthermore, decisions will need to be made on the basis of the whole. And all of us, regardless of where we generally attend, will need to see ourselves first and foremost as members of the Fox Valley UU Fellowship—not as members of the Fox Cities site or the Oshkosh site.⁷

Another, related key will be to realize that what is good for one site will inherently be good for the other. Multi-site experts lift up the Three Musketeers motto of "All for one and all for one." A great example of this is expanding this building. I would assert that doing so is absolutely essential if we are to have any hope of an Oshkosh campus coming anywhere close to fulfilling the vision I shared. This is because a congregation of 600—our current size—cannot sustain a full-fledged second campus. There simply are not the financial or staffing resources for it. But a congregation of 900 can. If we add to our building, we will have the capacity to become a 900+ member

⁶ McConnell, pp. 86, 128; Surratt et al., p. 175.

⁷ McConnell, pp. 46, 51, 97, 200; Surratt et al., p. 126.

congregation. In fact, our long-range membership projections predict that we'll be a congregation of 900 by 2015. 2015 is not that far away. But I can guarantee that we won't be anywhere near that size if we don't add onto this building. We will be too full and we will turn off and turn away hundreds of people who might otherwise find a spiritual home in this Fellowship. No one should be more enthusiastic about a building addition here than our Oshkosh members and friends—even if at some point in the future they don't come to this site very often.

And a final key is that launching a successful satellite in Oshkosh will happen only if we have the buy-in from everyone in the congregation. We will need Fox Cities members and friends to be enthusiastic about a second site in Oshkosh. And we will need everyone to know that moving forward with a second site will profoundly change this congregation—just as buying our first building on Superior Street and then this building changed the Fellowship. Just as calling a minister and then a second minister and creating other staff positions changed the Fellowship. Just as adding additional services changed the Fellowship. This Fellowship is a dynamic, vital, growing community because we have had the spiritual maturity time and time again to change it even though we love it just exactly as it is now.

And this brings us to the bottom line of why I think we should take these baby steps forward with a satellite in Oshkosh. I'm convinced that taking these baby steps will begin us on a path of making a more profound difference in the lives of many people in Oshkosh and in the life of that whole community. We have a wonderful long-term opportunity here. And I would argue that we also have a responsibility—to this faith and to its promise for the world—to move forward. Step by step, together, let's build a congregation that will make a difference from one end of the Fox Valley to the other.

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