

Partner Church Council -- Mission and History
Perspective In Partnering
Presentation, March 5, 1998
to the
Partner Church Council Network Workshop
by
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I begin my presentation by acknowledging my excitement in welcoming you here. This meeting is a dream fulfilled! I have longed for such a gathering and give special appreciation to Gretchen Thomas who has shepherded us all to this moment.

I want to answer four questions:

- 1) What is the vision/mission of the UU Partner Church Council?
- 2) Where are we going?
- 3) What is the role of Partner Church Council Networkers
- 4) What is the purpose of this workshop?

For some time now partner church organization and support has been the responsibility of a rather limited number of individuals. If we are to succeed in our work a larger group needs to be recruited, involved and responsible. Our Partner Church Council District Networkers are an integral part of the growth of partner church work and activity.

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Each of us begins our partner church connection with a personal experience. As we engage in this activity every one of us has a story, or many stories. And every story is experiential. This is our beginning. It is with an individual personal story or experience.

The recognition that our partner church work is grounded in personal experience reminds me of an image which has provided a metaphor of experience, and one which has served as a model for my engagement and ministry. This event took place here in Boston almost 50 years ago on the second floor of 25 Beacon Street -- the "Channing Landing" which in 1949 had not yet been segmented into office spaces.

It was July and I was working in the youth office (5th floor rear) as a volunteer Field Secretary for the American Unitarian Youth. The day was as hot and muggy as only a July day in Boston without air conditioning could be. In the late 40's the Beacon Press had published some of the work of Albert Schweitzer and he had been invited to visit "25". A call came to the youth office to announce that there would be a reception for Dr. Schweitzer and we were invited to attend.

AUY Director Paul Henniges and I put on our jackets (and ties too) and proceeded to the second floor where others were milling about, curious and eager.

The elevator door opened and Dr. Schweitzer emerged. His shock of `gray hair lay akimbo, his mustache was shaggy, his eyes deep blue. He was wearing a string tie and the heaviest black wool suit I could ever imagine! Hot! For a moment Dr. Schweitzer seemed bewildered, dazed, from too much travel.

Dr. Eliot (Frederick May Eliot, AUA President) gracious in his greeting proceeded to escort Dr. Schweitzer to the corner of the room in order that a reception line could be formed and everyone flow by to give the great man our respects.

Much to Dr. Eliot's dismay, Dr. Schweitzer would have nothing to do with a receiving line. Instead,

with grace and dignity of character, fully oriented, he proceeded to go about the room, without escort or pomp, extending his hand, to greet everyone there.

It was a singularly profound gesture. He moved about the room as if to say, “you do not need to come to me, I will reach out to you. We shall meet, engage.”

The introvert in me needed then (and continually needs) the reminder of that great gesture of simply reaching out, going forth, engagement . We are not in a “receiving line” of life. We grow from reaching out across lands and language to others.

It should not be surprising that words of Dr. Schweitzer feel so appropriate in this partner church connection:

“At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lit the flame within.”

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Can you recall your first deeply personal (rather than intellectual/rational) engagement/encounter with Transylvania and Transylvanians. When? Where? Did you know you were connected? Hooked? I offer as one example sentences from a letter by Bob Tripp (Fairfax, VA):

“My involvement with the partner church program began in July, 1992 when I accompanied the UU Church of Fairfax Choral on a visit (to) our partner church village of Szentgerice.....When I first learned of the Chorale trip to Transylvania, my initial reaction was, “Who wants to visit a little rural village in Transylvania?” Then I learned that the choir was going also to Budapest and Prague. So I decided to go along.....Well, Budapest and Prague are as wonderful as expected. What I did not expect was that I would fall in love with that little village. At first it was less love than feeling utterly overwhelmed..... (I returned in 1993) I was hooked. Love was full bloom. The wonderful, wonderful people: their warmth and caring and struggling. And for sure I realized we could help them and they could help us -- the latter by showing us how to become centered and focused in ways that many of us in the upscale suburban world have been losing. And, I am learning much more about the Unitarian world in Transylvania and seeing its connections to UU folks here.”

The engagement with Transylvania and partner church involvement, as Bob suggests, is not a casual exercise. It is essential to acknowledge that the power and passion of partner church work is driven less by rational responses than by the energy of deep inner feelings.

The reality that our work is greatly driven by an emotional power is also part of the difficulty in our work. For while we are working out of emotional drives we are at the same time called upon to respond to the “rational thought” questions about belief, practices, and the curious wondering which emerge from North American habits and practices.

This reminds us why a solely objective statement of Partner Church Council Mission and Vision is not sufficient.

But -- work grounded only in the power of the personal can also lead eventually to diffusion and by an inability to move from individuality to focus on growth or change.

In this context I found a reminder from Craig Dykstra useful. Dykstra in an article titled “Figuring Things Out” in a recent issue of Initiatives in Religion, called to his readers attention H. Richard Niebuhr’s

helpful reminder in his book **The Responsible Self**. Therein Neibuhr pointed out that the prior question to “what shall I do?” is always “**what is going on?**” So much of our “figuring out” is a constant stream of determining what is actually taking place in and around us.

The “figuring out” we all have to do in the midst of the complications of life is hard work. It takes thinking -- that delicate interplay of perception and conception that leads to penetrating understanding and interpretation. It takes thoughtfulness. It is an intricate interaction. Why are we doing what we are doing at all? What are the larger meanings and realities. For this reason I believe that in our partner church work and engagements before we ask “what shall I (we) do?” we need to ask, again and again; “what is going on?” This is the figuring out we need to do continually.

The first part of figuring out is to ask “how did we get here?” This is the history. For the history of the partner church program each of us has a piece. What I say now is my view of the pieces I have seen and experienced.

To piece together some of our partner church history I took time to look at past reports and chanced to come across some old AUA (American Unitarian Association) Annual Reports and Directories. I found, among other items, this “Report on Transylvania” included in the 1929-30 Directory. The words leaped from the page:

“The real strength of the Unitarian church in Transylvania always has been its schools.” (30 elementary schools, two secondary schools in Kolozsvár and Székelykeresztúr and the Theological School in Kolozsvár.)

(When I read these words I realized in a most powerful way why our colleagues in Transylvania feel so passionately about the reformation of their secondary schools. They are linked with their treasured and powerful traditions and history.)

Following the comments on the schools this paragraph followed:

“One hundred and twelve American Unitarian churches have adopted a like number of Transylvanian churches since the adoption plan was arranged through Dr. Gabriel Csiki in 1921. *It was then thought that three years would bring about better conditions in the Old World churches so the plan was based on that [three year] period.*” (Emphasis mine) “The assistance, however, continues to be needed, and it is anticipated that it will be for some time to come. The adoption plan has given not only material help but moral encouragement, which is out of all proportion to the financial aid received.”

Shortly after these words were written the stock market crashed. A world wide depression engulfed society. The AUA President Louis Cornish, who while strong on engaging with International Connections, did not have possess the institutional or organizational abilities needed to be able to deal with the demoralized state of the North American Unitarian movement. Partner (Sister) church connections languished, and for most AUA churches were erased from memory in the horrors of World War II. (Forty of the congregations with sister churches from the 1920’s are now active partner churcheds today. King’s Chapel, Boston, MA and First Unitarian Church, Berkeley, CA sustained their connections from 1920 to today and were the only congregations “reassigned” with their former partner church.)

We need to know that the seeds for today’s Partner Church activity were planted more than seventy years ago. Though dormant, they were nurtured by memory and hope in the Transylvanian soil to endure the trauma of the Second World War and the repressive forces of communism and Ceausecu years. War, repression, communism also dominated the climate of Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

But most particularly the seeds for today's partner church movement rested in Transylvania. Secrecy and fear completely limited contacts. In such a soil the flowers and fruits of partnership could not grow or mature.

In the late 1980's North American Unitarian Universalists become increasingly aware of the plight of our Transylvanian sisters and brothers. Dr. Judit Gellérd brought to our denominational attention impending threats for the destruction of the villages and thus of the Unitarian church. The 1988 UUA General Assembly passed a resolution calling this impending catastrophe to our denominational attention. UUA President Bill Schulz and Moderator Natalie Gulbranson initiated a trip to Romania which included a member of the US House of Representatives and a member of the Canadian House of Parliament to investigate conditions of our Unitarian churches in Romania and protest the scheduled elimination of countless villages. The team was denied visas several times until January, 1990 soon after Ceausecu's fall and death.

Faced with the unexpected opportunity for change and support, Bill and Natalie asked Bishop Lajos Kovacs "What can we do to help you?" and the quick response was "re-initiate sister church relationships." (During the church year 1989-90 Rev. Gyorgy Andrasi, Counselor for the Unitarian Church of Romania was studying at Meadville/Lombard Theological School in Chicago.)

Upon returning to North America Natalie and Bill sent out an invitation to all UUA congregations inviting churches to apply to be a sister church. There was an immediate response. Prior to and during the UUA General Assembly that year (1990) pairings between churches were determined in the midst of an uncertain climate of confusion and tension. It is important to note that -- as in 1921 -- the establishment and reinitiation of partner church relationships between North America and Transylvania was in response to an immediate political and economic crises in Transylvania.

There followed a flurry of activity. Judit (Zizi) Gellérd leaped to activity with a keynote talk, and publication: "*Save Transylvanian Unitarianism.*"

This was not a time for clarity or a mutually determined mission. Or for a clear and defined policy for "partnering." Or for clarity about who would be responsible for what or how anyone would be accountable to whom or whatever. The events of the time required response. The time to figure out "what is going on?" had not yet arrived.

This is a sketch of my personal experiences. It is my own ground for sorting out what was going on in those hectic days, seven years ago.

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The invitation to engage in a sister church connections was initiated by the UUA. My sense is that the UUA was surprised, not that churches would be interested in being "sister churches," but at the emotional quality and number of responses. The stated expectation was always for communication and global connection, and no one was prepared for the flood of resources, both financial and personal, which were to follow. Involvement with caring was expected, yes, but dollars no. It was like spontaneous combustion. In the months and years after the initial partnering there was an explosion of activity. Personal connections were forged between UUA churches and individuals and Transylvanian churches. There were a remarkable number of visits to Transylvania which quickly resulted in deepened involvement and personal commitments.

One thing which is especially clear to me now. It must be acknowledged is that we would not be here today working as we are, if it had not been for the commitment, vision, magnetism, persistence and energy of **Zizi!** Thank you Zizi!

And just as each of us has a personal connection with Transylvania I firmly believe that each of us also

has a personal “Zizi story.” It is well that we acknowledge our indebtedness to Judit for her engaging power to invite us to join in this mission of partner church work. Here is my own “Zizi story.” It occurred during the second year of my term as President of the Unitarian Universalist Minister’s Association. Judit approached me at a meeting: “Leon, the Unitarian ministers in Transylvania are in terrible financial condition. Is there some way you could help?” (Have you too heard that question?) (Translation for Judit’s question: “you must do something!”) I did.

With the agreement of the UUMA Executive Committee, we initiated the UUMA Transylvania Minister’s Support Fund inviting colleagues to send contributions for support of Transylvanian ministers. Contributions came quickly, and it worked out that I could bring the first fruits of our concern to Romania in March, 1993. Dr. Janos Erdo invited me to meet with the District Deans in Kolozsvár to determine the process of distribution: they were to decide how to divide the funds received. The amount initially seemed great, but when it was divided it felt like a paltry amount to me. The impact must have registered on my face, though I did not say a word, for quickly one of the Deans turned to me and said: “Leon, that amount is the equivalent of a month’s salary.” It was dawning upon me at a deep level of my being the hard reality of conditions and life in Transylvania.

When we are honest with ourselves, and resist any urge to rewrite the history of the early period of the evolution of partner church work we all remember that harmony was lacking between the UUA and Judit. The UUA, administration and Board of Trustees were, at that very time, also questioning the role and responsibility of the UUA for international projects, and were finding that partner church connections and work was exceedingly complex and time consuming. By mid-1993 there was a common recognition that the UUA could not be responsible for sustaining the partner church program.

As I completed my term as President of the UUMA I became increasingly concerned for the future of partner church work. As I wondered what I could do my thoughts turned to the work and ideas of James Luther Adams. Jim was fond of adapting the biblical text “By their fruits shall you know them” to “by their groups shall you be known.” So when Zizi approached Peter Raible, Dick Boeke and me to say, “Please, you must do something!” Jim’s dictum told me that we needed a relational vessel to hold and sustain our partner church work. We needed a group whose organization and structure could sustain this important work and allow it to flourish.

Thus at the 1993 UUA General Assembly in Charlotte, NC a small gathering of those concerned met in Polly Guild’s room to convene and establish the Partner Church Council. We drafted the following statement of purposes:

- * To deepen solidarity and increase mutual aid between and among churches and related institutions.
- * To act as a clearinghouse for information about partner church activities and funding.
- * To advocate to the UUA Trustees, officers and lay leaders and to the UUA General Assembly for formal Association support of the partner church program.
- * To increase awareness about and participation in the partner church program and in international Unitarianism at the district and parish level.
- * To make available for distribution educational material about partner churches which meets the needs of various cultures.
- * To facilitate exchanges between North American Unitarian Universalists and Unitarians in other countries.
- * To provide, as individual council members, support for this program.

The first issue of the Partner Church News* noted that, “In response to the need

for a network of support for congregations with partner churches in Romania, Hungary and the Czech Republic, initial steps were taken at the UUA GA in Charlotte, NC to establish a UU Partner Church Council.” An executive committee was designated to “develop programs for exchange of information and materials, and to insure continuity of the Partner Church Program.” We met, wrote by-laws, became incorporated as a non-profit organization in the State of Washington and received from the IRS recognition as a 501(c)(3) non-profit charitable organization.

Once again action was taken in response to a crisis. This time it was a crisis brought about by the mounting interest of so many North American churches, and the realization that the UUA could not continue work for global partnerships. What would be done for the partner church program would have to be done without UUA involvement and direct support.

* Polly Guild edited and published Bridges for the UUA which reported on the partner church program to June, 1993 and had been distributed to all partner churches.

In my first statement as President of the UU Partner Church Council I wrote:

“It is clear to me that this is the time (1993) to carefully develop an organization for mutual support for one another, with exchange of ideas and information to insure that our individual efforts are strengthened and effective.

“Our (the North American UUA churches) initial response for support was charged with emotion and a bit of nostalgia. It is now important for us to be grounded in recognition of the profound integrity and courage of our partner colleagues. We need to remember that we are engaged in a *partner* relationship.

Healthy partnerships exact a practice of both giving and receiving.”

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Much has happened in the five years since the organization of the Partner Church Council. Our annual cash flow which was initially less than \$10,000 last year exceeded \$150,000. In the years of our work more than half a million dollars in contributions have passed through our books to Transylvania, Hungary and the Czech Republic.

While we continue to respond to the need that focused our initial reasons for being to “Save Transylvania Unitarianism” we have added other significant dimensions including personal associations, deepening religious roots, sustaining of ministers and supporting economic development. We have added many layers of experiences and a growth in perspective and understanding. As an organization and movement the Partner Church Council is far more complex. The work we are doing now is more difficult and more long term than when we thought that three years would do it (just as in 1920). From 1993 to 1997 the Partner Church Council developed into a program that is now committed for the “long haul.”

The reality of the mutuality of partnering was emphasized by Rev. Sander Kovacs in his address to a PCC workshop at the UUA GA in Indianapolis, IN in 1996 following his year of study at Starr King:

“In my opinion, so single formula can be offered for all partner church relationships. Each relationship will be unique, focusing upon the objectives appropriate to those two churches, each envisioning and developing their own projects. I know that this works; I have seen it work and the results have been excellent.

“As in all relationship, ours needs to be built upon equality and mutual respect. It is not for us to attempt to impose our vision or our will upon the life of your church, any more than you would presume to do so with us. The best resources of each are to be found within and must be developed.”

We are moving past, well past, the first steps of engagement, beyond polite interchanges. For relationships to grow they need to be nurtured, cultivated, tended, cherished. These more significant relationships require us to understand each other at deeper and deeper levels what it means and what it requires to be in living relationship with others. This is what being a partner, and what being in a partner church connection must become.

Such nurture, cultivation and relational work cannot be initiated or sustained by an Executive Committee. This is the cause and the need for District Networkers. If we on the Executive Committee can nurture and support you in your work then you in turn will be able to be supportive and nurturing of the congregations and individuals in your districts. This workshop's purpose is to provide the beginning of your nurturing and the support for your reaching out to others. It is essential that we expand, deepen the leadership of our partnership circle. You are central and essential keys to the partner church movement's growth.

One further acknowledgment: success has called attention to our activities and has invited others to imagine an engagement of partnership. From other constituencies has come the question: "Can we partake too?" We have had inquiries about partnership from Poland, the Philippines, and India. And so is born the idea of Global Partnership. And from these requests has come the need to determine in what ways congregations can reach out to each other throughout the world.

I am certain it will happen. It will happen somewhere, somehow. At the same time the reality of the possibility of global engagements does not call for a change in focus for your work. The direction for you as networkers for the partner church program is with Romania, Hungary and the Czech Republic. This is our work now.

I will conclude with this brief listing of the elements in my collage of partner church work:

- * partner church work is grounded and sustained by our personal experience and call
- * we began and re-formed from crises
- * there is emerging a developing and deepening perspectives on partnering
- * there is an evolving structure/network for support and information between and among us (enhanced by meetings and immediate electronic connection)
- * this partner church work is enriching the lives and perspective of our congregations
- * we are involved in the strengthening of Unitarian Universalist faith in North America
- * we are engaged with the continuity of Unitarian faith in Transylvania, Hungary and the Czech Republic
- * before we can answer: "what shall we do?" we must know: "what is going on?"

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The Mission of the Partner Church Council? Initially it was simple and direct: make and support partner church connections. But there is as much meaning and activity between the spaces of the written lines of our purposes as in the lines themselves. We continue to be in the subjective stages of our collective life.

What is going on is a growing understanding of the problems, issues and lives we have engaged, a stronger drawing of the mutuality of partnerships, the imperative of continuity and sticking with it to truly know one another (and in the process our selves) at even deeper levels.

It may soon be time to revisit the Partner Church mission and purposes. Your presence and experiences as Networkers will be an essential dynamic for renewal and revision. For now the stage is set for us -- Networkers and Executive Committee -- working together to carry forward to work initiated in 1921, re-initiated in 1990, carried by us into the 21st century.

I am reminded that for every dream fulfilled an ever newer dream comes forth.

Albert Schweitzer's wisdom serves as a fitting and concluding thought:

“At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lit the flame within.”

So may it be.