

## AUC Talk

18/09/16

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My prepared talk is blissfully short. I intend it to be an introduction or stimulus for open discussion when I finish.

### Spring Cleaning

It's Spring, season of renewal. The earth and all its inhabitants are enlivened. Many of mankind's institutions are reinvigorated as well, like churches, eh? Like this church, bringing UU principles to Auckland and environs these past 114 years. New people, new programs, old and new issues receiving appropriate attention.

Except, there may need to be some Spring cleaning to clear our space of the remnants of the elephant in the room. There is one, you know, an elephant - in the room. Who here does not know what this saying means?

Explanation, if necessary.

So, what's the elephant in AUC's room? I don't know. But, here's why I think there may be one. My evidence that there is an elephant in the room is that we, as a congregation are a fairly static population, and probably have been for several years. We gain a few, lose a few, and putter along making financial ends meet with a population that can just afford the expenses.

All this is in spite of the fact that we have an intellectually interesting and diverse group a supportive membership. We have one of the most important aspects of a successful community, a core of people who have been around quite a while, who carry the history, traditions and tenacity of the community.

**(Stand up if you have been here at least 10 years, remain if you have been here 20 years, 30. Thank you. Wonderful, eh?)**

As Clay pointed out in his talk on the 4<sup>th</sup> of September, the core values of the church, listed on the wall, are intrinsic and match those of New Zealand. And, as churches go, we are about as secular as you can get, which parallels the current trends of the country; less religiosity, more secularization. As I see it, as a church community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we've got it all, except for the people.

I'm bringing this up is because I was a member of another UU church before that experienced exactly the same situation, limited-population and wanting/needing to grow. But, my previous church lacked many of the assets available to us here. Here is a synopsis of my previous experience, which I think can be instructive to us now.

Augusta, Georgia, had a UU congregation that rocked along from the 70's into the early 90's with a total number of pledging units (main source of church financial support) of no more than 80, usually between 65 and 80. It had a church building, of sorts, R.E. wing, employed ministers off and on, and had a tightly knit group of wonderful supporters who definitely had the best interests of the church at heart. However, in contrast to this church, the Augusta church existed in the deep South of the US, a religiously very conservative locale. For example, the area across the street from the UU church was occupied by the 1<sup>st</sup> Baptist Church of Augusta. That church represented the religious norm of the area much better than we, and you could tell. Their brick-faced physical plant sat in a multi-acre landscaped campus and consisted of the sanctuary building, Sunday-school building, and a recreational building with indoor basketball court. The steeple of the church cost significantly more than the entire net worth of the UU church property. UUism was a relatively tough sell in that neighbourhood.

I was able to serve that Augusta UU church in a few capacities, including serving on the board, and I still have many friends there. Sharon and I were married in that church. The one

question that continually bedevilled the Augusta church administration and long-term supporters was “How can we grow our church population?” We instigated many efforts including national level consultants from the UU main offices in New England, a building development drive that built a new sanctuary and remodelled the rest of the physical plant (the phrase “If you build it they will come”, comes to mind), small group discussions, large group discussions, all resulting in - about 80 pledging units; which now had to service a mortgage as well as the rest of the church activities. We were stuck. Now we were also broke. But, we had a beautiful sanctuary. Sharon and I made a small leaded glass window for it.

I can't remember the dates all that well, but for our purposes it does not matter. We'll make some up, just to illustrate. Let's say that in 1991 the Augusta UU church had an average attendance at Sunday services of around 50, in a new sanctuary with seating for 100, sort of like here.

That year, the church finally confronted its elephant in the room, but the way they uncovered their issues, the elephant, resulted in terrific uproar, gigantic hurt feelings, and loss of membership. The church board, to their credit, ( I wasn't on the board at the time) then instigated a restoration process, a Spring cleaning.

In 1996, after spending 5 years of systematically dealing with the residuals left by that elephant in the room, attendance had grown to the point that a second service was added to many Sundays in order to accommodate all who wanted to attend. A few months ago, I mentioned some of this scenario during talkback. Clay retrieved the microphone from me and quietly said, “I'll bet they started to listen,” or something like that. In a nutshell, that was exactly what happened. I know because I was an integral part of the restorative process. I was one of 5 members of a mediation panel, chosen by the board, that received specific instruction in communication and group process. Our role as the mediation panel was to participate in

church-wide seminars in communication and group process, to lead future ones, and act as examples to the congregation at large, at their various church functions and activities. The personal changes we each made, the 5 of us on the panel, were replicated by many others in the congregation over the 5 year period. These intrinsic changes then produced the extrinsic ones the church had been trying to achieve. The panel members did not “fix” the church. The willingness of the congregation to examine and change the way they communicated about their issues “fixed” the Augusta church. The uproar that precipitated the positive changes was not necessary. It was unfortunate. But, it was how it happened there.

The Augusta UU Church had its own elephant to deal with, but to accomplish its own Spring cleaning, the congregation had to learn to listen to one another. Once active and receptive listening began, there was no holding the church back. If it can happen there, believe me, it can happen anywhere.