



John DiLeo © 27 December 2020

My musings today are, not surprisingly, about us.

Nina Khouri led our service a few weeks ago, mentioning that she, Derek Handley, and I have embarked on an inquiry regarding the “Future Church.” We have been asked to reflect on the current state of our community, and ponder the possibilities for what it could be in the future. It occurred to us – pretty much immediately – that this isn’t something we can go off and do on behalf of everyone else. Instead, we need to lead a *guided introspection* by the entire congregation.

For any among us who have been involved in strategic planning in any organisation, the themes we immediately recognised we need to focus on should be familiar – in particular, our identity, our purpose, and our vision of our future selves. Who are we as a community, why do we exist as a community, and what do we want to *become* as that community? Pretty heady stuff.

At a somewhat more tactical level, our thoughts have touched on things like how to maintain and utilise this space, what sorts of outreach and service we can, should, and/or want to do in the broader community, attracting and retaining new members, and our plan for future leadership. All of these have a common thread – sustainability. In short, how do we keep the Auckland Unitarians “going and growing” as a community?

A key thing I’ve learned the hard way over the years is that tactical initiatives can’t possibly get us where we want and need to be, if we don’t *know* and *agree on* where that is. To know that, we ***must thoroughly understand*** our identity, purpose, and vision.

Today, I’m hoping to continue the conversation Nina started about our identity. She asked us to ponder what makes this community “home” for us. Today’s question is a bit different, but certainly related – what makes us “us”?

In preparing for today’s talk, I found a number of blog posts aimed at helping churches to define their identities. These had a few elements in common. Here’s an excerpt from one post’s advice:

“Start by finding your congregation’s point of difference. To do so, you need to **take an honest look at your congregation**. Not what you hope it will be. Not what you think it is. Not what you want it to be.

But, with no prejudice, look at it through the eyes of an **outsider**, one who does not yet know you...I say without prejudice and as an outsider because creating a fantasy land will only cause visitors to become disappointed, disenchanted, or, worst case, disconnected.

Now that your eyes are open, what makes your congregation different...? The ideal distinction should come from your congregation's mission statement. If that is too general a statement, look deeper. Base it upon your connections with the community.

It could be the types of the services you offer. It could be your youth or outreach programs. Whatever you determine that to be, it must be within the context of your congregation's overall mission and it must speak to those outside your [it]."

Once you've discovered your point of difference, communicate it consistently through each channel, each tool, and each network that you have at your disposal. Check to **make sure your message is consistent** on your website, social media, bulletins, signage, and in the way you and your membership interact with the community. Your logo (if you have one) should reflect this as well."

<https://www.concordiatechnology.org/blog/2016/03/who-are-you-defining-your-churchs-identity>

- Retrieved 26/12/2020

In another post I found, the author puts forward five questions to ask ourselves in determining who we are and **where we are** as a church:

- 1 What's the general makeup of your church body?
"Look at everything from racial makeup to primary language makeup to generational makeup."
- 2 What kinds of gifts, talents, and experiences do the people of your congregation have?
"It's highly likely your church has more ministry potential than you can imagine...for example, an abundance of teachers in your church may show untapped potential for...outreach into your local public schools."
- 3 Who are your ministers?
"Generally speaking, [ministers] best reach people their age or [up to] 10 years younger. Your [ministers'] ethnic, racial, and educational backgrounds also play a part in who[m] your church will best reach."
- 4 What are some of your church's signature ministries?
"Ask yourself this question: 'If we were to close down every ministry in our church, which would be the last [ones] to go?' Those are probably your church's signature ministries."
- 5 What has your church done that has been fruitful (particularly in recent years)?
"This is connected to the previous question. The answer may be the same, but this will broaden your view...you may notice that preaching pops up over and over again. You may notice a specific event...Fruitfulness can be measured in many ways, but it will generally be connected in some way to the making of [new members]."

<https://www.vanderbloemen.com/blog/5-questions-define-your-church-identity>

In her thesis "You is the Church': Identity and Identification in Church Leadership," Megan Gesler, a 2013 Master's graduate of the University of Montana, raised several interesting points that resonated with me and are pertinent to today's topic. I'll quote just a few here:

"There are expectations regarding the process of becoming and the practice of being a member of a church."

“Members of a church leadership are different from most volunteers because they act simultaneously as clients, volunteers, and management.”

“Church identity construction and enactment is believed to happen through individual action. The communication of the desired entity is necessarily discursive. Thus there is a complex interplay of church identity and individual identity.”

“Organizational identification includes a connection between individual and organizational identity construction through voluntary participation in church behaviors.”

This last point is, I think, crucial to the conversation I’m hoping we’ll have today, and goes back to a comment I made earlier: *we are what we do*. Our weekly rituals, the external programs we host and support, the causes we involve ourselves in, our interactions with one another, the ways we choose to communicate to the broader community – those behaviours are the truest definition of who we are.

I ask each of you to reflect on what makes us *us*, particularly to an “outsider,” a new visitor to our congregation. Understanding our identity, as it now stands, leads to tougher questions:

- Is there a gap between what our identity *is* and what we *want* or *believe* it to be?
- What would we, as a community, have to do to bridge that gap?
- If a change we’d have to make to align our *actual* identity with our *desired* identity makes *me* uncomfortable, what can *I* do – and how can the congregation help me – to gain peace with that change, and continue to feel a part of the community.

When I first started preparing this talk, I had planned to tick off a list of things *I* believe about who we are, who we *should be*, and what *has to change right now*. But, I quickly realised that would be wildly counter-productive. I certainly have a lot to say on the matter, but that’s just one member’s perspective.

To progress in our journey toward a shared, meaningful, and *sustainable* identity, we have to understand and consider *everyone’s* perspective, honour their truth, and approach change and growth in a loving manner. That’s not to say the journey will never be painful. It’s crucial, however, to acknowledge, respect, and do what we can to minimise that pain.

After we close this morning, I ask that you stick around, form into small groups, and discuss your thoughts on today’s Discussion Question.

The primary question is:

If the world could know **just one thing** about us as a community what would you want that to be?

The follow-ups are about your first answer:

- (a) do you feel that thing is *true* about us right now? and
(b) If not, what do you think we should be doing to *make* it true?