



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Nah/Yeah

Clay Nelson © 13 August 2023

As has been mentioned once or twice recently, and to my great sadness, I am retiring at the end of the month. Because I have loved all forty-one years of my ordained ministry in two denominations and my nine years with you, I want to scream, “Nah, this isn’t how I planned it.” But, “Yeah, it is the reality I must come to accept...kind of.”

The expectation of ministers, when they retire, is to absent themselves for at least a year from the congregation they served to make room for the new minister. As trained UU ministers don’t grow on trees here or in Australia, and it will be a while before we can hire my replacement, I’ve been asked to help fill the vacuum on a voluntary basis while you figure out where you want to go.

But I do want to respect the tradition of making room for the future. I will take direction from MC and the transition team, lead worship on occasion when asked by the Worship Associates, will help mentor those taking a worship study course at the request of ANZUUA and UK Unitarians, sit *ex officio* on MC and the finance committee, and offer information, advice, and pearls of wisdom rarely, cautiously and only when asked.

This explanation got me reflecting on the dynamics of making room for the future and why it is necessary yet so hard to accomplish in most aspects of our lives. Because I have to scale back my ministry, I find myself reminiscing on my journey, which might shed light on the difficulty. I’ll try not to impose my life on you beyond human endurance.

When I was five, I was baptised with my mother and baby sister in an Episcopal church built in the middle of an Oregon bean field. The bean farmer donated the land on the condition that we would go out in procession once a year to bless his fields with smells and bells. The priest was Father Bozarth, a Russian emigrant with a colourful presence. He had a daughter my age who would one day be among the first eleven women illegally ordained as priests in the Episcopal Church. Illegal or

not, it could not be undone. But I get ahead of myself. That would come to impact me twenty years later.

Father Bozarth defined for my five-year-old self what church was. One of my memories is his getting up at the family service and chewing out those who were complaining about disturbances by children during worship. He made it clear that the kids were worshipping as children should. Those who were bothered could go to the later service.

A couple of years later, we moved to Yakima, carved out of the orchards of central Washington. One day while I was playing with friends in the front yard, a black 1956 Ford with a fire engine red interior stopped in front of the house. A rotund man in a black suit and white collar got out of the car. He said he was Father Baker. He then went to the front door, introduced himself to my mother, and asked if he could take the kids out for ice cream. The fifties were a more innocent time. She said yes. I remember it so clearly because I had my first banana split. It was not long before we were attending St Timothy's, Father Baker's new church. He believed in feeding the congregation every chance he got. While there, I got my first Bible, a prize for memorising Bible passages, singing in the children's choir and becoming an acolyte. All that furthered my understanding of what church was, and I loved it.

We moved a lot when I was growing up. The next unexpected destination was a small college town high in the Colorado Rockies. Always being the new guy made me an easy target for bullying by teachers and my peers. While I know many of you cannot say the same, my safe space was the small Episcopal church where Father Babb, fresh out of seminary, was the minister. Here I experienced a church youth group. It was a place to hang out with new friends, learn more about my faith tradition, explore who I am, and do service projects for the church and community. Church was fun and good for my fragile self-image.

There would be other moves, but you get my drift. Church continued to be my safe place, which constantly challenged me to grow in unexpected ways. I didn't understand it then. I'd had no input in deciding to move, but each move made room for a future I could not anticipate.

Moving ahead a few chapters, I still didn't appreciate how hard the future was to predict. For instance, I was accepted into a PhD programme at a prestigious university and ended up going to seminary. I sure as hell didn't see that coming.

When I was approaching graduation from seminary, I was headhunted by various churches. I was looking for a traditional parish much like those I grew up in. So, I was surprised when the rector (what we call a vicar in America) of Bruton Parish invited me to interview. It was not what I was looking for, but going for the interview would only take an hour, and then my family could explore colonial Williamsburg, Virginia.

Bruton Parish is the oldest Episcopal Church in continuous use in the US. It has more than a million visitors a year. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, and many other founding fathers worshipped there. Pocahontas was baptised in its baptismal font. Williamsburg is also home to the College of William and Mary, established by Royal Charter in 1693, making it America's second oldest University.

Well, back to the interview. Held in the rector's study, it exceeded an hour because church leaders would just drop by and chat. Then the rector invited me to walk down to William and Mary to meet the college's president. We conversed for nearly an hour when the rector suggested we gather the family for a lunch his wife had prepared at the rectory. After lunch, he took us for a behind-the-scenes walking tour of Williamsburg.

When the time to go home arrived, he took me aside and offered me the position of Assistant Rector of Bruton Parish and Chaplain of William and Mary. I was stunned, but not as much as the rector when I turned down the offer. Yeah, it was flattering, but nah, it wasn't the kind of church I saw myself serving. So, I firmly closed the door that had room for the future. A week later, I accepted a position outside Buffalo, New York. It looked like where I belonged. But it wasn't. Two years later, I was looking again. I was offered a position I did not seek at St John's Lafayette Square across from the White House, where every president of the US has worshipped. Hell no. I certainly didn't belong there. It had no resemblance to my ideal church.

A few weeks later, a lovely church in a small town near Pittsburgh offered me the position of rector. Now this was more like it, but before I could accept it, my mentor in Buffalo asked me to consider another position first. Once again, it did not fit what I was looking for, but I had promised him to wait. It was Christ Church Cranbrook, a highly influential parish of 3000 members north of Detroit with an annual budget of over one million dollars. It had been built by an influential newspaper

publisher who was a friend of Henry Ford. The CEOs of Ford and GM were members. Surprisingly, it was a very liberal church.

The rector had been informed of my reluctance, so he drove to Buffalo to make his case. He was very charismatic, but I still declined. Not one to take no for an answer, he convinced me to visit the parish. I still remember seeing the church for the first time. It was gorgeous as well as intimidating. He pulled out all the stops, including a visit with the Bishop of Michigan. He explained that there were five clergy, but I would be number two, responsible for running the church while he dealt with diocesan and national church affairs. I still declined. I knew what my future was, and this wasn't it. As I was getting in the car to return home, the rector pointed out that if I knew with certainty what my future was, it probably wasn't. I had a long drive home, during which I had an Epiphany as I thought about what a church was and what it was not. A healthy church is not a club but a beloved community for its non-members as for its members. Its primary task is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. What it is not is safe. Every time you enter these doors, you risk not leaving as the same person who came in. For ultimately, a church offers transformation on the path to becoming fully human. I came to agree that the rector was right. When I got home, I called him and made room for the future. My time at Cranbrook changed everything. From that time forward, I only accepted positions that honoured the future. What else could explain my nine years at St Matthew-in-the-City and nine years with you? Neither was on my future's itinerary, nor did they resemble those churches I grew up in that had frozen my idea of being church.

So, here we are. I have no idea what the future holds for my retirement, but I will try to make room for it to be revealed. I do know that my past journey in the ministry and my preconceived notions about how to do church will not be allowed to prevent you from making room for your future. It is time for me to get out of the way. A creative time is before you, and I hope to glimpse from afar what you do with it in whatever years I'm granted. I am confident it will be magnificent.

Meditation / Discussion question

How has your life evolved in ways you had not planned?
Name one or two things that changed your course.

