

## THE NEXT NINETY-NINE YEARS

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First Unitarian Church  
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One hundred and one years ago, on April 17, 1904, the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh dedicated its new building. One year ago, we marked the centennial of our building. Among other things, we commissioned a choral anthem entitled “Peace Be Within These Walls” which was composed by Nancy Galbraith; we heard a powerful keynote address from Nadine Strossen, President of the American Civil Liberties Union; and we enjoyed a presentation put together by Kathy Parker on the history of First Unitarian Church. Many other people contributed in many other ways to our building centennial celebration.

But now it is time to look toward the future. I invite you to speculate with me about the promises and the challenges of the next ninety-nine years, through April 17, 2104, when those who come after us may have occasion to celebrate the two hundredth anniversary of our building. I would like to begin by listing some driving forces, some trends, and some facts that may shape our culture in profound ways over the next ninety-nine years.

First, our culture will experience increasingly widespread use of computers and digital technology. Many of us have witnessed the advent of mainframe computers, personal computers, fax machines, cell phones, compact discs, medical diagnostic equipment, instant messaging, palm pilots, power point presentations, geographic locator systems, and other digital gadgets and gizmos. Perhaps one of the new frontiers will be the integration of biology and digital technology. In any case, the creation of new applications for computer and digital technology shows no signs of slowing down.

Second, since we have now used approximately half of the world’s oil, energy and transportation will become sources of increasing political tension and personal concern. Many familiar aspects of our culture have developed in an era of abundant oil. What stresses and strains will our society face as oil becomes scarce? What new living patterns will emerge? What stresses and strains will the international community face as oil becomes scarce?

Third, a global perspective will become increasingly important in business, economics, politics, communications, and culture. Business leaders are routinely required to think globally. Financial capital moves from one industry in one part of the world to another industry in another part of the world as quickly as investors can type on their computer keyboards. Hollywood movies reach a global audience. Yet, even as the world shrinks, people will be increasingly faced with the challenges of getting along with other people who have different cultures, different beliefs, different aspirations, different values, different languages, and different histories—or different versions of history.

Fourth, religious fundamentalism—whether in Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or other religious traditions—will become increasingly widespread around the world as a

defensive response to modernity. Cultures which did not invent the modern world are not necessarily eager to embrace all aspects of it. Even within the cultures that did invent the modern world, many people are not necessarily eager to embrace all aspects of it.

Religious fundamentalism offers a compelling retreat from modernity for many people.

Fifth, many people will prefer to explore their own personal spirituality rather than identify with a religious tradition. For many people, exploring a personal spirituality means combining multiple religious perspectives. This approach reflects the postmodern challenge to the credibility of any grand, all-encompassing narrative.

Sixth, the “winner take all” phenomenon will become more customary in business, in politics, among non-profit organizations, and perhaps in religion as well. For discount department stores, restaurants, news media, motels, bookstores, clothing stores, office supply stores, classical musicians who are recording artists, computer operating systems, and many other business enterprises, the trend has been toward dominance of a market by just a few widely dispersed, well-known providers. This model may move into other sectors as well.

Seventh, economic turmoil will increase as workers in developed nations compete with workers in developing nations. Many American workers no longer compete just with other American workers. Nowadays, they compete with workers in India, China, Malaysia, and other places around the world where the standard of living may be lower. This puts downward pressure on wages in the United States, and, according to some observers, reshapes society from one with a large middle class as its dominant demographic feature to one increasingly polarized between its haves and its have-nots.

Eighth, environmental awareness and concern will need to play a bigger role in decision-making around the world. The jury is not out on global warming. The scientific evidence suggests that global warming is becoming a serious problem: not to mention wildlife habitat destruction, airborne and waterborne toxins, rainforest destruction, wetlands destruction, and the extinction of species, among other environmental troubles.

Ninth, Caucasian people will become a minority here in the United States. Whether we like it or not, we will face the challenges and the opportunities of multiculturalism. Americans of European ancestry will need to make a little more cultural room for others, and they will find it increasingly difficult to take their cultural prominence for granted.

I'm sure that others would identify a different list of driving forces, trends, and facts that are likely to shape our culture in the future. Perhaps you can think of some things that are not on my list.

If step one is to identify the driving forces, trends, and facts that are likely to shape our culture in the future, step two is to imagine how we might respond. Many people, of course, will create whatever response the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh makes to the new opportunities and challenges of the next ninety-nine years. Here are some of my thoughts.

First, those who inhabit this building over the next ninety-nine years will continue to struggle with pastoral issues similar to those we struggle with and those our ancestors struggled with. Finitude, transience, and mortality will continue to present challenges to our religious descendents. Members of First Unitarian Church will continue to struggle with loss and grief, with illness and aging, and with the limits of their knowledge and influence. People who gather here will continue to seek meaning and hope. Those who

come to this church will continue to find ways to strengthen their relationships and move purposefully through the stages of their lives. In years to come, however, if everyday life becomes more challenging, these pastoral issues may become even more acute. In response, this congregation may want to strengthen its ability to bring people together in caring relationships, and we may want to bring pastoral issues closer to the center of our life as a religious community. Covenant groups and other small groups, lay people who are skilled at listening, staff members who have the training and the time to offer pastoral care, plus other possibilities that we have not yet imagined, are all ways that we can offer comfort and reassurance and encouragement to one another.

Second, we can seek ways to use digital technology for our own purposes. If we want to find ways of communicating more effectively among ourselves, no doubt digital technology will offer some useful tools. If we want to find ways of bringing our message to the larger world more effectively, no doubt digital technology will offer some useful tools. If we want to find ways of preserving an image of our community for historians in the future, no doubt digital technology will offer some useful tools. If we want to find ways of creating religious community among people who are not in the same room at the same time, no doubt digital technology will offer some useful tools. If we want to find ways of creating more effective and more powerful worship experiences for people who are in the same room at the same time, no doubt digital technology will offer some useful tools. If we want to find ways of putting our faith into action, and bringing our values into public conversations, and making the world a little more civilized through our advocacy on behalf of justice and democracy and interdependence and multiculturalism and science and responsible citizenship and the inherent worth and dignity of all people, no doubt digital technology will offer some useful tools.

Third, when we get ready to replace our classroom building with a larger structure, perhaps we can make it an environmentally responsible building. We could install solar panels on the roof. We could make the southern exposure wide open to the warmth of the sun in colder months. We could use building materials with especially effective heat insulation. Those knowledgeable about environmentally responsible architecture could provide plenty of ideas for us to consider. For now, I would add that whether or not we construct an environmentally responsible building, a structure suitable for our needs might cost \$1.5 million or more. Congregations smaller than we are now have raised that much money, however. I am confident that when the time comes, we will have the financial strength and the visionary enthusiasm to construct a truly outstanding building.

Fourth, dwindling oil supplies and more environmentally sensitive attitudes may make cities more attractive places to live over the next ninety-nine years. Accordingly, we may want to develop a deeper appreciation for our opportunities as an urban church. Our current plan is to expand our membership to six hundred adults, but if cities become more attractive places to live, our membership may grow to a thousand or more. Thus, we may wish to acquire a second piece of land not far away for purposes of expanding our activities. Moreover, if cities become more attractive places to live, we may want to think about starting a new Unitarian Universalist congregation right here in the city. I am also happy to note that at least six families who are members of First Unitarian Church live within one block of this building. It is an intriguing prospect to think of additional families from our church moving into this immediate area. I will also mention that one

church member, looking at the property now for sale at the corner of Fifth and Amberson, wondered about the possibility of a church-affiliated housing cooperative for seniors—not necessarily an assisted-living facility, just an place that would provide opportunities for practicing the advantages of interdependence. These ideas suggest to me that we may want to think more deeply and more extensively about what it means to be a religious community.

Fifth, we may to affirm more decisively our distinctive blend of religious affirmations. I like to think that the two main enduring sources of religious insight for Unitarian Universalism are the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Nowadays, however, the values that we bring forward from the Enlightenment, in particular, are viewed with suspicion and even hostility in many quarters. The use of reason and scholarship in religion; the use of evidence and scientific demonstration in understanding our world; respect for the human rights of all people; faith in the natural capacities and abilities of human beings; an attitude of intellectual humility; a preference for solving conflict through peaceful means; concern for the economic well-being of all the inhabitants of our nation and the world; a respect for impartial justice and a willingness to persevere for the sake of justice in society; concern for the well-being of this world here and now for its own sake; the separation of church and state to promote freedom of religion, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, perhaps, to prevent reactionary elements within religious traditions from blocking the advance of civilization, as has happened all too often—all these are values and principles that we, as Unitarian Universalists, bring forward either from the Enlightenment or from our liberal Christian roots in the Protestant Reformation. But sometimes it seems to me that these values and principles are becoming increasingly rare in our world. And if it is true that a “winner take all” approach is becoming more common in many sectors of society, then we, as a religious movement of modest size, have even more reason for concern. In the next ninety-nine years, therefore, we will need to promote our ideas with special vigor and clarity, and we will need to provide those ideas with the strongest institutional embodiment that we possibly can.

To these five points I have mentioned, I would add only that in the next ninety-nine years it will be important for us to stay connected with contemporary Biblical scholarship, which in my view is confirming many of the understandings that we have been professing all along, and with new knowledge about families and human development, and new research on environmental sustainability, and new insights into biology and genetics, and always history, particularly our own history.

I’m sure that many of you will have your own ideas about how our church can respond to the opportunities and challenges of the next ninety-nine years. I believe that as Unitarian Universalists, we have something worthwhile and perhaps even essential to offer to one another and to offer to the larger community. I hope that we will have the courage and the vision and the institutional strength and the clarity of expression and the passion to make a positive difference in our world. The next ninety-nine years may not be easy for the human community. Let’s be prepared to offer all that we can.

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