

**“We Interrupt This Program . . . “**  
**by the Rev. Ann Schranz**  
**Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation**  
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Disruptive behavior can be considered from many points of view. In family systems, in organizations, and in society as a whole, the most effective way to improve the system may be for one party to stop playing his, her, or its usual role within the system – to disrupt the system. After all, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. pointed out, “The agitator is the part that gets the washing clean,” and well behaved women seldom make history. Those who have seen the latest Star Trek movie know that not only is the young James Kirk “the only genius-level repeat offender in the Midwest,” he also saves the day through his “disruptive” behavior on more than one occasion.

In short, disruption is not always detrimental. As Harry Ragland said in an early draft of his remarks, “Viva appropriate disruption!” The task before us is to figure out together how to tell appropriate disruption from inappropriate disruption. How shall we decide which is which in this Unitarian Universalist congregation today?

As we sort this out together, it is important to recognize that Unitarian Universalist congregations have changed over time. In his book *Exploring Unitarian Universalist Identity*, Unitarian Universalist minister Peter Richardson writes that three different social orientations have characterized Unitarian congregations over time: the Standing Order, the Free Association, and Pluralism. An understanding of ways that congregations are organized is particularly important because this congregation’s consideration of a possible disruptive behavior policy is taking place within a pluralistic congregation.

To place today’s Unitarian Universalist congregational pluralism into context, let us look at the social orientation models that preceded it. There was a time in Massachusetts when Unitarians were part of the established religion or the “Standing Order,” as it was called. People attended the church that was geographically closest to them, a church typically located less than a half mile from their home.

Usually people attended services on Sunday morning *and* on Sunday afternoon. The church was the social center of the community, and the minister was expected to look out for the spiritual welfare and moral rectitude of everyone in the area. Geography was destiny when it came to church affiliation; territorial parishes meant that people had limited options. Regarding churches in rural areas, Peter Richardson notes, “It is of course the medieval model, transplanted here, where the people lived clustered together surrounded by their farmlands.”<sup>1</sup> In cities, too, geography was destiny. People attended services at the neighborhood church.

In the early days, the church’s budget was funded by selling pews to those families able to afford pews. Churches were built of a size to accommodate the number of families who were expected to buy pews, not of a size to accommodate the expected number of worshippers on Sunday morning. If someone declined to provide direct financial support to the local church, he paid to support the church through taxes.

The shift in congregational social orientation from the Standing Order to a voluntary association model was forced upon churches when Massachusetts formally disestablished religion in 1833. By 1833, Unitarians had inherited about one third of Massachusetts parishes. However, no longer would people be forced to financially support any church. Now people had options. People could choose church or no church.

In urban areas even before 1833, people began to have choices when it came to joining a church, and the “free association” model of social orientation came into being. A person could choose a church to fit his or her theological beliefs instead of necessarily attending the geographically closest church. The diversity of theological points of view came into existence through the so-called “Unitarian Controversy.” which began about 1805. In essence, the Unitarian controversy was about the importance of Jesus and the role of Jesus regarding the capacity of human beings to develop spiritually and to live moral lives.

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*Exploring Unitarian Universalist Identity: The Minns Lectures for 2005 “The Boston Religion: Special Themes”*, Red Barn Publishing, 22 Mechanic Street, Rockland, ME 04841-3514, 2006, p.24.

In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Massachusetts churchgoers could often choose between a two flavors of Congregational church – orthodox or liberal, i.e., Trinitarian Christian or Unitarian Christian in outlook. Families could sell their pew in a Unitarian-oriented church and buy a pew in a Trinitarian-oriented church or vice versa. This degree of autonomy was in synch with evolving conceptions of human capacity as being ever more competent and resourceful. Whereas with the Standing Order, geography was church destiny, now one’s church “destiny” depended upon one’s view of human nature and of the importance and role of Jesus.

Do you believe that humans are innately depraved? You might appreciate one type of congregation. Do you believe that the human capacity for “likeness to God” has been greatly underestimated by orthodox Calvinist doctrine? You might appreciate another type of congregation. A new dimension of freedom opened: a choice between flavors of Christianity. This marked the transition from the “Standing Order” to the “free association” model of congregational social orientation.

One pioneer in this trend was the Unitarian minister James Freeman Clarke, who founded Boston’s Church of the Disciples in 1841 based upon a startling premise: Pews would be free, and financial support of the congregation would be voluntary. “The Church of the Disciples came to be nicknamed ‘The Catchall Church.’”<sup>2</sup> If, 150 years ago, The Church of the Disciples was “The Catchall Church,” what in the world can we call Unitarian Universalist congregations today? Catchall Congregations on Steroids? Wild and Crazy Catchall Congregations?<sup>3</sup> Wild and Wonderful Catchall Congregations?

Today people affiliate with Unitarian Universalist congregations not because they are the only game in town or because they represent a particular flavor of Christianity. Today people affiliate with Unitarian Universalist congregations *precisely because of the pluralism found in them*. Today Unitarian Universalist congregations are pockets of pluralism – philosophical, theological, and in terms of any facet of identity imaginable. Unitarian Universalist congregations are pockets of pluralism focused on enhancing the wellbeing of society and of the self.

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<sup>2</sup> *Exploring Unitarian Universalist Identity*, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> Have Powerpoint graphic that says “Krazy Katchall Kongregation.”

Peter Richardson highlights aspects of this pluralism. Small group ministries are thriving in Unitarian Universalist congregations across the county. What attracts people is the impulse to know others at a deeper level, along with a willingness to be known by others at a deeper level. In today's pockets of pluralism, the Sunday morning service is no longer necessarily the time when the congregation gathers. Instead, people may feel connected with the congregation by participating in such activities as work parties, the Buddhist group, the choir, the BUUK group, the Adult Forum, drumming group, the Green Team, religious education, and so on, just to name a few options here. This shift from the "free association" model (which offered choice in terms of flavors of Christianity) to radical pluralism marks the shift to a "multi centered" congregation.

"A pluralistic congregation may confound the consumer of religion mentality because it is not a single mode environment. There may be a confusion of invitations to greet one at the door, shaking loose the product oriented expectations with a time for sorting and reflecting, shaking loose conventions and connecting with the self that is to grow. A multi centered congregation does not offer a mirror but rather engages the need for choice, to identify one's own path, to differentiate," he says.<sup>4</sup>

"A multi centered congregation engages at several levels, keeps one in the presence of alternatives and hones the congregation's capacity to serve a multi centered world . . . Pluralism is interactive enlivening of congregational life and giving people with a wide diversity of backgrounds a place to land and a base for creative imagination and expression. Our congregations could become workshops for working out in religious community what we recommend and advocate in a wider diverse and pluralistic society and planetary humanity."<sup>5</sup>

Peter Richardson notes, "The challenge in a pluralistic congregation, philosophically, will always be to hold it with a large enough vision."<sup>6</sup> What vision is large enough to hold the pocket of pluralism called Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation? I cannot yet know, and you cannot yet know because we are co-creating it. We are creating the large vision together. While

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<sup>4</sup> Page. 34.

<sup>5</sup> Page 35.

<sup>6</sup> Page 35.

we cannot yet know the *contents* of that large vision, we can and must determine a sensitive, fair, and healthy *process* for addressing disruptive behavior.

In the absence of a congregational policy on disruptive behavior, everyone has to fly by the seat of the pants in responding to situations as they arise – the minister, the elected lay leaders, and everyone else. The potential for hard feelings, fear, suspicion, and abuse of power is great in the absence of a congregational policy on disruptive behavior. Congregational policies on disruptive behavior are increasingly common. Last month, Pacific Southwest District Executive Rev. Dr. Ken Brown addressed the Board of Trustees and said that two other congregations besides our own are grappling with this issue right now.

Why the popularity of disruptive behavior policies? Over the past 35 years or more, Unitarian Universalist congregations have evolved from being collections of individuals to being communities willing to set boundaries for the community. I believe that setting boundaries for the community is especially important given that congregations are pockets of pluralism.

The Unitarian Universalist Association's website has this to say: "Congregational leaders and members have the responsibility to provide a safe and welcoming environment for children and adults—both regular attendees and visitors. Developing a Disruptive Behavior Policy (DBP) indicates a commitment to creating a safe and welcoming environment by confirming a list of expectations for everyone's behavior. A DBP establishes behavioral guidelines that consider the community's well-being first and foremost.

Disruptive behaviors may impact perceived safety of any adult or child, the disruption of church activities, and the diminishment of the potential [membership] and existing membership. When any person's physical and/or emotional well-being or freedom to safely express his or her opinions is threatened, action must be taken. The guidelines provided by a DBP mean that all are held to the same set of standards. The DPB provides a process that leaves less room for singling out a person based on stereotyping or personality conflicts. Disruptive behavior can be summarized as one or more of the following

- **Dangerous:** is the individual the source of a threat or perceived threat to persons or property?
- **Disruptive:** what is the level of interference with church activities?

**Offensive:** is the behavior likely to drive existing members and visitors away?”<sup>7</sup>

The Board of Trustees has been asked by the Committee on Ministry to begin a process which may lead to adoption of a disruptive behavior policy. This week, members of the congregation had a chance to review copies of disruptive behavior policies in effect at three Unitarian Universalist congregations in this District. These examples were shared in order to highlight basic principles, as well as the diversity of approaches taken by different congregations. Among the principles that other congregations have found useful are these:

- 1) The same standards apply to everyone.
- 2) There is no attempt to specify acceptable behavior in advance.
- 3) When a response is called for, the response is measured, careful, and “progressive.” There are escalating consequences for escalating behavior. It is not a case of stepping over some line and getting hit with both barrels.
- 4) The dignity of every person is foremost.
- 5) When limits are set, so also is set the way that a person can return to being part of the community.

In a few moments, there will be time for people to respond to the theme of this morning’s service. May we appreciate the precious pluralism we find here. May wisdom and compassion increase, now and always. May it be so!

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<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.uua.org/leaders/leaderslibrary/ethicscongregational/44145.shtml>.