

## **Growing Bold: UUFCM Has Something To Say**

Rev. Joe Cleveland

*Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan*

*May 4, 2014*

### **Story**

*Ruby Mae Has Something To Say* by David Small

### **Reading**

from "The Urgency of This Moment" by Adam G. Gerhardstein<sup>1</sup>

*Adam G. Gerhardstein was the campaign manager from 2009-2012 of the UUA's Standing on the Side of Love Campaign, which advocates against exclusion, oppression, and violence based on identity.*

Prophetic churches minister to the community as it is while reminding the community of what it could be. They transform the community with a vision embodying our Unitarian Universalist principles. Grounded in the here and now, prophetic churches connect this moment with eternity. They reference the past but refuse to conflate it with the present. They forge a vital understanding in congregants: Our present actions help shape the future.

Prophetic churches convey the urgency of this very moment. [. . .] Our message is most prophetic not when it focuses on how far we have come or how far we have to go, but on where we are now, and how the now connects with the eternal human experience. Our message must be, "Look around you! Grab the hand of your neighbor—*this* is the defining moment!"

[. . .]

Prophetic ministry seizes the moment with a firm grip, refusing to let the significance of daily existence and shared community slip through our fingers. Prophetic ministry holds up the kinship and common destiny that we share as a human family, even as it acknowledges our differences. The prophetic church saves our souls while we work to save our world—today.

### **Sermon**

The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan has something to say.

That's not as poetic a sentence as *Ruby Mae Has Something to Say*. The name is a little long. But shortening it isn't what is necessary. Though I will suggest that if you haven't heard the joke about the Unitarian Universalist congregation that wanted to

---

<sup>1</sup> included in *A People So Bold: Theology and Ministry for Unitarian Universalists*, edited by John Gibb Millspaugh. (Skinner House Books, 2010).

shorten its name for the message on its answering machine that you ask Jean Daab to tell it to you. It's a PG-13 joke, just to let you know.

The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan is a name that takes some practice before it dances off the tongue. Maybe it's the Bobatron that this community wears, like the Bobatron made with love by her nephew Billy Bob that Ruby Mae wears, that enables her to speak.

Actually, that's one of my questions for you: What is the Bobatron that helps you to speak your truth? And what is it that the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan has to say? No, don't answer right now. *I have something to say.*

In order to say what I want to say I have to say something else first. I have to talk about what it means to be prophetic. I think that the first way we hear this word *prophetic* is to assume that it has something to do with the future. We often think of *prophecy* as a prediction about the future. It's a kind of magic trick. That is not the kind of prophecy I'm talking about. In fact, I don't think that's what being prophetic is really about. My Hebrew Bible professor was very adamant about this point. The prophets in the Hebrew Bible are not fortune tellers. What they are raising their voices about is what's happening *now*, whenever their particular *now* happened to be. They decry hypocrisy and oppression and the human-created suffering in the world as it is. They describe where that path will lead. And they lift up a vision of other possibilities, other opportunities. These other possibilities are often presented as a promise from God. "Comfort, comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, ..." says the prophet Isaiah (40:1-2). The thing to notice is that the promise exists right now. Even if there are other forms of prophecy, that's when prophesy is most effective: when it is rooted in the *now*.

In many ways I think that the best example of current day prophets are people like Bill McKibben and Naomi Kline and Barbara Kingsolver and James Hansen and others who are talking about climate change.

I think that Bill McKibben, for example, is saying some amazing things. But I don't think that he'd have such a prophetic voice if it wasn't for [350.org](http://350.org), the organization that he and some of his students in Vermont founded. That organization has given him a platform to speak from. [350.org](http://350.org) is his Bobatron, his funny hat that gets put on his head and helps him to speak. They were involved in the "Reject and Protect" action that culminated last weekend in an encampment on the Mall in Washington, D.C. by the Cowboy Indian Alliance, a group of ranchers, farmers, and tribal members from along the proposed route of the XL pipeline. Thousands of people were there and *they had something to say*. Reject the pipeline! Reject dependence on dirty energy. Protect the land!

Part of what they had to say isn't in what they said. It was in how they were together. Ranchers and farmers and indigenous people *together*. In that togetherness, the future that they prophesied is present right now.

They are an amazing organization and we are making a mistake if we think Bill McKibben is more important than [350.org](http://350.org). What's prophetic is that coming together of people with passion, excitement, and a clear vision. [350.org](http://350.org) is a prophetic community.

That's what I see starting to happen here at UUFCM this year.

UUFCM is in the midst of change. And no, the change isn't about me. Those of you who were part of this community might have been experiencing some *deja vu* this week after you learned that I will be leaving the congregation this summer instead of next summer like we had all thought. You might be thinking, *oh, here we go again*. But you are not in the same place that you were a year ago.

This congregation has done an amazing amount of learning about itself. One thing that it has learned is that the congregation is in the midst of change. And this change isn't about change in ministerial leadership, not really. Something much more fundamental is going on. You are discovering what you care about.

You are also discovering that what the congregation cares about has changed. At first, the congregation seems to have cared the most about establishing a safe space for people who don't fit into anything like an orthodox religious box. Do you have doubts about God? Here you are encouraged to doubt boldly! Here, you are admired for boldly doubting! Atheists and pagans and Christian humanists and more can gather together here and not be reviled for not toeing a conservative Christian line. Here, a different, more expansive sort of spirituality is available. Here, a different, more expansive sort of non-spirituality is available. Whether or not you believe in the soul, this is a soulful place. Whether or not you believe in spirituality, this is a spirited place. You are people of spirit!

And you are a welcoming people. It is a great, good thing that there is a religious community in this town that flies the rainbow flag by its door and says that same-sex loving people are not just welcomed, but celebrated here.

This has been a wonderful gathering place for like-minded, welcoming people. People curious to explore other possibilities for what spirituality can be, other possibilities for what faith can be in their life. So you've gathered not just on Sunday mornings, but in sewing circles and in first Friday potlucks. You watch interesting movies together on Second Saturdays. You've taken a *Building Your Own Theology* course. You've shared your talents at a coffeehouse night and gotten together for philosophical pondering on Wednesday mornings. And all of that has been great.

But there's a shift that has been happening in the congregation. And I think one of the early signs of that shift was the work this congregation got involved in around the anti-discrimination ordinance. There is an ordinance in place now in the city of Mount Pleasant and in Union township that makes it illegal to refuse to serve or rent to someone on the basis of their sexual identity or orientation. Doesn't it feel kind of incomprehensible that that is not the case for the State of Michigan as a whole? The work this congregation did getting that ordinance established didn't just make a difference to the people who walk into these doors on a Sunday morning. That work made a difference for every person in this city, every person in the township, for every student from out of town who comes here to study at CMU.

Putting that ordinance into effect was a profound way of transforming the community with a vision based in Unitarian Universalist principles.

I know that Norma Bailey gets a lot of the credit for this, but frankly, there is no way Norma could have done it by herself.

Here's what I want to say to you: "A prophetic leader does not make a prophetic congregation."<sup>2</sup> OK, I admit, that's a quote of someone else, a Unitarian Universalist named Paula Cole Jones who is the lead consultant for an anti-oppression consultancy program for UU congregations.

That anti-discrimination ordinance happened in large part because this community was discovering what it cares about. The congregation began to get a glimpse of itself as a prophetic congregation. And it is prophetic congregations that make for prophetic leaders.

The congregation is in the midst of change. All those social and spiritual programs are still good and at the same time, there seems to be a growing itch for something more. The Transition Team, charged by the congregation to manage this transition work for the congregation, has put on a series of events and all of them have pointed to a change in the congregation. It started becoming clear in the cottage meetings held last fall: The congregation really likes the welcoming atmosphere and the social happenings, but there's an itch for something more. A more outward focus. This was reaffirmed in the workshops on being a multigenerational community and on thinking outside the box of what this congregation could be.

And it became much more clear in the workshop last Sunday that did some impressive work toward a renewed sense of mission for the congregation. We started by imagining what the congregation will be like five years from now. What characterizes the congregation five years from now? What will it be like. And the 25 to 30 of you who were there wrote furiously on Post-It notes and stuck them on four sheets for four different aspects of congregational life. Then they were grouped into

---

<sup>2</sup> Paula Cole Jones. "Growing Our Souls." *A People So Bold* (Skinner House Books, 2010). 128.

categories. Then we gathered those categories together, renaming some and came up with a list of what seems important to the congregation. And then we narrowed that by voting on them.

Given how successful all of the social programs of the congregation are, I think the results might have been a little surprising. Then again, given all that the congregation has been learning about itself this year, maybe not. Two things received almost the same number of votes, each almost twice as many votes as the next highest vote-getter. Social events wasn't one of the two things. The two that rose to the top were Worship Life and Social Justice activities. The group talked about the results what sort of a mission statement they might lead the congregation to. After some discussion, Vicki Chessin spoke up as if with the voice of the room and said: "Transforming our spirits and our world."

I don't know if that will actually become a new mission statement for UUFCM, but it is a great start. I think it is a significant step toward helping the congregation say what it has to say. Paula Cole Jones, the anti-oppression activist I quoted earlier says, "The prophetic church presents a vision that compels us to act. The vision enables leaders not only to see future possibilities but to identify barriers and obstacles to their fulfillment."<sup>3</sup> I see that this congregation is becoming what she calls a prophetic church. And I think it's because you are discovering what you care about.

The management consultant Margaret Wheatley says, "There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about." That's because discovering what you care about, you discover your Bobatron! You discover what it is that helps you speak. You claim your prophetic voice.

In becoming a prophetic congregation, again, here is what I have to say: A prophetic leader does not make a prophetic congregation. The prophetic voice comes out of the congregation. Claim that prophetic voice as a congregation. No matter who serves this congregation as a minister, the main thing I have been wanting to say is that this congregation is about *you*. Your minister, your leadership, will be as prophetic as you empower them to be. And you will be more prophetic as you commit to living as a prophetic community *now*. That is the boldness that I see you are growing into. You are growing into a more expansive sense of yourself.

The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan has something to say. You are transforming our spirits and our world.

Amen.

---

<sup>3</sup> Paula Cole Jones. "Growing Our Souls." *A People So Bold*. (Skinner House Books, 2010). 129.