

What Are We Doing Here?
Rev. Linda Thomson
First Unitarian Congregation, Toronto
Sunday, August 24, 2025

Good morning, friends.

What a joy it is to be here this morning. What a journey it has been. In 2018 you voted to sell your old building and to seek a new home. The time between that moment and today has been a bit more complicated than you could have imagined. So much has happened. A pandemic, the departure of a much-loved minister, rental spaces, on-line, and unanticipated delays in the completion of this space and more ministerial transitions. After a long, frustrating and transformative time, we have arrived at today. The past 7 years haven't exactly been 40 years of wandering in the desert, but like Moses and the Israelites, you have been on the move and unsure of when you might arrive.

I invite all of us, those here today and those online to pause, to look at one another, to take a breath. Together. It is good to be together.

It is mostly coincidence, but I don't think the timing of today's sermon topic, "What are we doing here?" could be better timed for today. Here we are, setting out on the next chapter of the life of this congregation seems an excellent time to ask the questions: **Why are you here? What are we doing here?**

Now, I don't mean why you're in this particular room on this particular Sunday—though maybe the answer is: "I wanted to see what the space looked like", or "the coffee is better than at home" or "my kid woke me up too early anyway." I mean something bigger. Why do we *bother* with church at all? Why do we still, in 2025, gather as a congregation? What are we doing here?

Because let's be honest: you can find inspiring TED Talks online. You can meditate on your own in your living room. You can donate to good causes with a few taps on your phone. If it's just about information, inspiration, or action—none of us *need* a congregation.

And yet... here we are.

I heard a story, about someone who had taken a long break from church. I've taken some, have you? Anyway, after very long break from church, she came back one Sunday morning. She had been through a rough season—work stress, a breakup, feeling burned out. When asked what prompted the return she responded, "I didn't come because I suddenly believed something new. I came because I needed to be reminded that life was bigger than my problems."

She said she walked in, sat down, and before the service even started, someone smiled at her and handed her the order of service. And just that—the smile, the unspoken “we’re glad you’re here”—was enough to bring tears to her eyes.

That’s the thing: a congregation isn’t a place we come only to *think*—it’s a place we come to be *held*. Sometimes by words, sometimes by music, sometimes by silence, sometimes by each other.

We live in a culture that tells us we’re supposed to be self-sufficient. We’re supposed to figure out our lives on our own, pick ourselves up by our bootstraps, never ask for help.

But here’s the truth: human beings were never meant to go it alone. We are wired for connection. And congregation is one of the few places left where we practice that. Where else in our society do people of different ages, backgrounds, and beliefs promise to stick with each other—not because we agree on everything, but because we’ve chosen to be companions with one another?

James Luther Adams, a Unitarian scholar of the last century said, “Church is where we practice being human”...not always graceful, the business of practicing. There is a story, about the First Unitarian Church of Chicago which was, at the urging of their minister, and Adams, who taught at Meadville Lombard and was a member of the church board, considering a by-law change to become a desegregated congregation. This was happening at a time when desegregation was a hot topic... Most Board member agreed with the proposal, but one objected, saying ‘you’ll exclude those who don’t agree, and it is telling people what to believe’. The story goes that at one board meeting, which had gone on far too long – it was after midnight, Adams, asked the person who was objecting, “What do you think the purpose of this church is, then?”. Everyone took a breath and waited for the response. The person in opposition paused and responded, “To change people like me”. The bylaw change was passed. Congregations can be a practice ground for being human.

We practice patience when the sermon runs a little long. We practice forgiveness when someone forgets our name. We practice generosity when we pass the plate. We practice hope when we sing songs that we don’t always feel in the moment.

It’s not about being perfect. It’s about practicing—so that when we step back into the wider world, we’ve exercised those muscles of compassion, resilience, and courage.

But here’s the other piece. Congregation isn’t just about what happens inside these walls. It’s about what we carry with us when we leave.

But you know that. That knowledge was fundamental to the decision to leave the old location, to wander around, without a secure place to call your own, until today. I know that the past few years have been challenging, frustrating and at times overwhelming,

even as they were, at the same time, full of promise and hope. I am not usually an, 'everything happens for a reason' kind of person. But I am, at least some of the time, a 'what meaning can we make from this?' kind of person. I mentioned Moses earlier, and while it is, in contrast to this congregation's recent history, quite epic, I do see some resonance.

A quick summary of the story involves a character Moses, who becomes the leader of a group of Israelites, enslaved in Egypt. Moses, receiving instructions from God, leads an escape, of his people from Egypt to a promised land. The journey is NOT straightforward. People follow but soon grow tired of the uncertainty of the 40 years they spend wandering in the desert. GPS might have been helpful... but there you are. 40 years. In the final phase of the journey, just as the end is within sight, Moses, and most those that escaped with him, are all dead. It is the next generation that can finally arrive at the destination.

Modern scholars see the 40 years in the desert as about transformation, rather than geography. The people had been enslaved for generations. You can't just walk out of Egypt and immediately be free in heart and mind – ready for what comes next. The desert years symbolize the long, often frustrating process of becoming a new kind of community. The old ways needed to be forgotten before you are ready for a new understanding of yourself as a people. Even Moses himself, the leader, doesn't enter the promised land- there is a truth in this about leadership and life - no one person completes the journey. So, the story is about growth. It's about new ways require inner change, not just a new address. It's about how communities, like individuals, sometimes must wander, to stumble, to learn through struggle, before they are ready for something new.

And as I think about the wisdom in this story, it has me asking, is there similar meaning and purpose to be found in our story? When I asked Google for a profile of the neighbourhood of 175 St. Claire W, your old address it told me, "The neighbourhood surrounding 175 St. Clair Ave W in Toronto is a blend of upscale residential areas like Forest Hill and South Hill, characterized by luxurious, high-end condominiums". When I asked the same question about this neighbourhood, the answer includes, "Oakwood-Vaughan is a vibrant, multicultural Toronto neighbourhood. It's a residential area with active regeneration efforts, attracting diverse residents and families. Those are not the same things... I know you have a commitment to being good neighbours, to become integrated into the community. The Building Connections with Oakwood Vaughn group has begun making connections and has taken steps towards being part of this neighbourhood, one more representative of the city than the one you left. I wonder how ready the working group or the congregation would have been to build those mutually respectful kinds of relationships if you'd been able to walk out of your old building, straight into this one. Maybe you needed the time, to shake off the Forest Hill identity,

to spend time with one another in a wandering, building-less state, learning new ways of being in community, before the potential of today was possible. Maybe you could have done it... but the truth is you are a different congregation than you were. Some people are no longer here, or are here in different ways. There are new people, those who joined you without the associations that the old address had. You are a new community, and you are here today. You have arrived. It is a good day.

Back to the question. What are we doing here? What are we doing HERE?

We come, I think, in large part to understand ourselves, to practice the business of being human. As I think about my time as a UU, 40 plus years, it is hard to think back, wondering how my life might have unfolded without the comfort and more importantly, the challenge of being in UU community. I honestly believe I've been encouraged, and sometimes prodded into being a better version of myself. I think my consumer habits, my hobbies, my parenting choices, the way I've been in partnership with my spouse, Gary have all been influenced. I'm pretty sure, me, a white, well educated, straight, woman, the child of a loving home, would probably not have become an activist, speaking out for the rights of LGBTQ people, if I hadn't had good people challenging my assumptions about the way the world worked. I think a non-UU version of Linda would have been surprised to see me advocating for equal marriage at a Federal Legislative Committee. What are we doing here? We are asking people to grow, in compassion and in support of justice and equity. How that plays out in our lives, may look different from person to person, but we are asking that we push past some of our assumptions, and consider new perspectives. I have practiced being human, I know, because I know something about your stories and the history of the congregation and its work in the world that you have too.

And, there have been a few occasions in my life when my family has faced loss – the death of a niece, the loss of jobs – others too. And in those days I have, like the woman in the story I shared earlier, I have been reminded that I am held in love, that others, care – that people see me. I know that happens in this congregation. You care about one another; you do your best to be fit companions. It is a gift.

So challenging, caring, so that the members of this congregation are encouraged, and sustained during the years of their journey is indeed part of the answer ... What are we doing here?

But, what are we doing HERE? I suspect part of the motivation for the move was to advance a more diverse congregational profile. I've heard the thinking – If we move to a more diverse neighbourhood, more people, those with different identities than are typical, will know who we are and then we'll find ourselves a more diverse congregation. That may happen. It may not. If that is the dominant motivation though, it means we are still centering ourselves in the consideration. If that were the motivation

it would mean the choice was driven by our needs and wants. Of course that is going to be part of the thinking... I'm not naïve. But I think we can do better.

Oakwood Vaughn is already diverse, it is vibrant, and it is full of people who are doing good work. Your connections with the Oakwood Vaughan Community Organization, reflect the collective desire to support good work – not out of a sense of 'oh, let us help you be more like us', but rather to do your part in the work, so that we may in a dance of interdependence, create a vibrant mutually beneficial community.

What are we doing here? We are resting, if only for a while, we are celebrating. In the years since the community voted to move, bought this property, managed the realities of congregational life during a pandemic, found rental space, met online, faced the disappointment of construction delays, you have done good work. This is not the congregation it was in 2018 when you voted... there are new faces, some are missing and more importantly you have grown into the community that gathers now.

Lets celebrate, and lets remember what it is we are doing. You have a new mission statement – it kind of says it all.

*We are an open-minded and welcoming
spiritual community guided by shared values.
Our mission is to nurture connection,
share life's joys and sorrows,
and act for love and justice.*

WE don't share the same beliefs or backgrounds, but we are curious, we do share some values, of connection, of companionship and of love and justice. Each one has a role to play in making that dream reality. We begin today in doing that work here, in this neighbourhood, with one another and those outside this building.

There's an old tale about a traveler who came to a village and asked three people what they were doing. The first said, "I'm laying bricks." The second said, "I'm building a wall." And the third smiled and said, "I'm building a cathedral."

That's what this congregation is. On the surface, we're just laying bricks: singing hymns, brewing coffee, holding meetings, teaching kids' classes. But together, we're building something far greater than the sum of its parts: a living, breathing community of love.

So the purpose of this congregation? It's simple, and it's profound: to remind us we belong to each other, to shape us into people of compassion, and to send us into the world carrying a light that doesn't go out.

That's what we are doing here.

Lets have some coffee, and talk to one another, keep our minds and hearts open and then, each in our own way, get on with it.