

## The Inflatable Church

A sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement  
 Delivered at the First Parish Universalist, Malden, MA  
 October 19, 2008

Excuse me a minute my phone is ringing.

*Jackie:* First Parish. This is Jackie.

*Caller:* Hi. Could I please speak with the person in charge of building management?

*Jackie:* Well, we don't have a building right now, but I'm the minister; can I help you with something?

*Caller:* I'm from XYZ company and I'm calling because our company can meet your building maintenance needs better than your current company.

*Jackie:* Oh, well, thank you, but as I said we don't own a building right now so we don't really have any needs.

*Caller:* May I ask who is servicing your building now?

*Jackie:* We don't have a service company at this time because we don't have a building.

*Caller:* Oh. Could I just speak to the person in charge of building maintenance then?

Seriously, this is the conversation I have on an average of twice a week. I'm not picking on any particular company because I have this same conversation with power companies, cleaning companies, roofing companies, telephone companies, and most especially office equipment companies. Most people just finally hang up puzzled, except for one very sweet person from a cleaning service who said she would pray for us.

Let's face it, we're not a normal church, and people have a really hard time understanding how we are a church without a *church*. But frankly, I think we are a better church now than when we were worrying about all the demands of a building that did not meet our needs. Like Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* we are dependent on the kindness of strangers, and we have met some really wonderful new friends that way. And it has opened us to look at who we are and what we are called to do as a religious community in ways we hadn't expected. It's called us to look at *church* in a new way.

For instance, did you know that for 31,500 euros you can buy an inflatable church? And just so you don't spend the rest of the service trying to figure out the exchange rate that comes to about \$41,000. For some reason the inflatable pub costs \$58,000.

But the blow up church is really quite a bargain. Let me quote from the sales brochure:

The attention to detail is heavenly, complete with plastic “stained glass” windows and airbrush artwork which replicates the traditional church. Inside it has an inflatable organ, altar, pulpit, pews, candles and a gold cross. Even the doors are flanked by air-filled angels. The church can be built in 2 hours and dis-assembled in less than one.

And I’m happy to say that high heels will not cause a blowout.

Now if you think this is just a joke you’ll want to talk to Father Andrea Brugnoli of the Sentinelli del Mattino youth organization that uses the blow-up church to lure beachgoers to seaside services along Italy’s coast. You can even watch video footage on-line of some pretty happening church services.

But, if an inflatable church sounds a tiny bit, well, plastic to you there’s also the Church on Wheels starting at just \$25,000 for the Freedom Series church in a trailer and topping out at \$66,000 for the Hallelujah Package.

Frankly I don’t think these sound any goofier than having a skate park and a Starbucks in the vestry. All these options are designed to serve their faith communities in different ways. The only problem I have with some of them is that they are self-serving in a rather shallow pop culture way, designed to make church a Disney-like experience that entertains rather than a spiritual experience that awakens, informs, challenges, comforts or connects.

There are churches, however, that are doing things in a very different way to bring real and substantial change to the lives of their members and to the lives of their community. For instance, the True Bethel Baptist Church in Buffalo, NY, has a Subway sub shop in its church building. But it is not there so parishioners can grab a quick bite after services. It is there to provide jobs in a very depressed economic neighborhood. More, it is there to provide job training to a population that has little work experience or opportunity. It is there to provide a different model to the gang members who come in for sandwiches that people who look just like them and come from the same neighborhoods can have legitimate jobs or own small businesses that better the community life.

Some of the folks who come for jobs at the sub shop don’t know how to fill out an application or in the case of one woman arrive at the interview wearing bedroom slippers. That’s when the deeper mission of True Bethel kicks in as those applicants are offered a training program on how to successfully apply and interview for a position. That, to me, is a church with a very unexpected building, but a very traditional and worthy mission—helping its community.

The difference at True Bethel from these other churches is that they attract members by doing real, valuable service in the world rather than by offering fleeting entertainments and comforts. I have no argument with a nice latte and little air conditioning, believe me. But I will take soul-sustaining, world-changing work any day over surround-sound audio

systems and video sermons. The difference at True Bethel Baptist is that their non-traditional building fulfills their mission as a church rather than fulfilling the members' desire for their own comfort.

Despite the historic and lovely setting, what we are doing together this year is also pretty unusual. The experiment of being two congregations together, autonomous yet sharing worship, ministry and programming is not often seen. It has been seen in *this* church before as the Malden congregation once welcomed the congregation from Everett, so some of you have experience of this, but not many other congregations do. Yet this is one of the fullest expressions of the Unitarian Universalist principles and theology David and I talked about last week. Opening your home to others, not as the poor dependent orphan, but as equals, calls for the true fulfillment of what it means to be a church. This, I think, is the greatest test of a church building – does it help you fulfill your mission of being a church? It's a lesson many churches have learned too late, that no church building, no matter how grand or historic or lovely, is *the* church. It is the congregation, the work of the congregation and its mission that constitutes the church.

Now I know that this message is nothing new to the folks from Saugus. You were among those smart enough and aware enough and courageous enough to know when the building was no longer serving your mission and to make the tough decision to move on. But I want to acknowledge first what a remarkable thing you did, and secondly that I think you are the better for it. The spirit of this congregation has grown immeasurably since that decision was made and the ways in which you came to the decision brought you together in ways, in *good* ways, that many communities never experience.

Let me tell you the story of another church, an Episcopal church in New York. At one time it was the church of its neighborhood attracting all the important people of the area to its glorious space, one of its most awe inspiring features its Tiffany windows. This church also lived out its mission through a teen soup kitchen program that both fed the hungry and gave the teens of the neighborhood useful and fulfilling work. Well, the church fell on hard times, attendance dwindled as the neighborhood declined until they could no longer afford to keep the food program running. So what did they do? They sold the Tiffany windows to pay for the food program.

Yes, it seems a shame for them to lose something that beautiful and that much a part of their church, but they knew what their church was all about. In a radio interview one parishioner admitted that the windows did create sacred space and much would be lost without them. "But," she said, "the first congregations worshipped in tents, and that was sacred space, too." All the Tiffany windows in the world couldn't have made that space sacred for that congregation if it had lost its reason for being. That congregation understood that it is not the space, but what you do with it that counts.

And a church that is living out its mission, that is using the potential of its resources, that is something to behold. That is a church that has created sacred space. Stained glass and the finely carved wood create the setting for the sacredness but it is your presence here, the intention with which you gather that transforms it into sacred space rather than just

beautiful space, that animates its full potential to touch human lives and transcend simple material concerns.

When a church is living out its mission it doesn't want beautiful space to show its status or prestige to the community, not as a marketing device to attract new members but rather the beauty of the church reflects the pride and joy we take in being a religious community with a mission. And that is an infectious thing. People may come for coffee bars and movie theaters, but they will only stay if what is offered is true and sustaining and worthy of their care. Only when the spirit, the mission, the intentionality of community, is stronger than the worship of bricks and mortar can a church be a church.

And so we continue to ask ourselves which church do we want to be? Do we want to be the church where you can get a half-caf grande caramel macchiato and a sauna? Or do we want to be the church where transformation happens? I don't pose that as an idle question, but as a challenge for the week ahead and the weeks to come to really think about just what our mission is, to what purpose does our church exist—now in this time—not in 5 years and not 5 years ago—but now. How will we fulfill our purpose?

These same questions apply to our lives as individuals and to our lives as families. What person do you want to be? Is your life about being a person who appears a certain way or about being the person you are called to be? With people, no less than with churches, it is not what physical resources we possess but rather the intentionality and purpose to which we use those resources that makes our space sacred space.

The choices we make as individuals and as churches to remain true to our highest good may puzzle a lot of people. You may find yourself in a lot of absurd conversations because of them, but our mission is not to conform to the expectations of others. So I continue to have these nonsensical conversations with phone solicitors, and every now and then one sweet person offers to pray for us.

Por lo tanto, puede ser.  
May it be so.  
Namaste.