

Contents

The Death of All Souls	1
1. The Cold Equations	2
2. Options	4
3. Time to Build Consensus	5

The Death of All Souls

The Worship Committee here at All Souls plans services far in advance, often three months ahead. That gives speakers a chance to plan, write and rewrite their messages; it gives Carlene and the choir time to select and practice music appropriate to the theme. Sometimes, however, events in the world intrude, and there are things that are more important to talk about than the planned message. This is one of those times.

I had originally planned to talk about whether Santa Claus or Jesus was the best symbol of Christmas. It would have been appropriate to the season, perhaps amusing and interesting, and probably ultimately forgettable. But a situation has emerged we can no longer ignore and put off, that we all need to confront, talk about, and make decisions about. And we need to do it now. To state that situation bluntly: ***All Souls is dying.***

For me to address that situation at this time is a case of *deja vu*: it was just five years ago this month that my wife Marilyn and I learned of her cancer; it was two years ago this month that that cancer took her life. For three years we lived with the realization that all our hopes and dreams and expectations for a retirement full of travel, grandkids, and joy-filled togetherness, that all that was gone. Her faith helped. She believed in an after-life. She was reluctant to leave this life, but she expected to visit me from the life beyond. I on the other hand was losing my soulmate; all too soon I would be alone.

To be told that you have a terminal disease is terrifying, and it is a terror that you must live with for the rest of your days, however long they be. To be told that a loved one has a terminal disease is likewise terrifying in its own way. Not only do you sorrow for your loved one, you grieve for your imminent loss and the prospect of life without her. And it is grief that you feel, not as intense a grief as what you experience when death finally comes, but grief nonetheless. Anger, sadness, depression, manic hopes for a miracle, all those debilitating feelings that we experience in response to loss, become a normal part of everyday life for as long as the dying process takes.

I find myself in very much the same situation now. It has become increasingly clear that All Souls Unitarian Universalist Community of Lacey is dying, not of cancer but of a fiscal anorexia that appears to be irreversible. And I am grieving.

1. The Cold Equations

To explain this prognosis, I would like to use as an analogy a story from science fiction:

[To quote from Wikipedia,] "***The Cold Equations***" is a ... short story by Tom Godwin, first published in *Astounding Magazine* in 1954. It is widely regarded as one of the most notable stories in the history of science fiction.

[To summarize the story] A starship makes the rounds of Earth's colonies, adhering to a schedule from which it cannot deviate. When reports of a fever outbreak on the frontier planet Woden reach the starship, it drops off an Emergency Dispatch Ship, a space vessel of limited range, with a pilot and the serum that will cure them. The pilot discovers a stowaway, an 18-year-old girl named Marilyn who wants to see her brother, a colonist on Woden. The girl believes that she will have to pay a fine, but the situation is far more serious. The ship only has enough fuel for the pilot and his cargo. Her additional mass will cause the ship to run out of fuel before it can land, dooming both the pilot and the sick colonists. The pilot tries frantically to come up with a solution, but there is no way around the "cold equations"; he does not have sufficient fuel. The best he can do is to alter the ship's course enough to give her a single hour's reprieve before she must be jettisoned. In that time, she writes letters to her parents and her brother, talks with the pilot about death and, in the last few minutes, is able to speak with her brother on the radio, allowing them to say their goodbyes. When the horizon of the planet breaks up the radio contact, the girl enters the airlock and is ejected into space.¹

All Souls is facing its own kind of "cold equations". I had an inkling of them when I saw our budget last spring: according to that budget our income was covering everything but our rent, and that was inexorably eroding our ever-diminishing savings. At the time I thought the numbers were troubling, but maybe a more careful examination would quiet my fears, and maybe we could do something about them.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cold_Equations

Those hopes seem now to be unfounded. Let's take a look at the numbers for the past year:

1. Our annual expenses:	\$21,000
1. Rent	\$16,800
2. Dues	\$2,800
3. Operating expenses	\$1,400
2. Our annual income:	\$11,000
1. Pledges (17 out of 24 members)	\$11,000
2. Actual Pledge Income	\$8,500
3. Other income	\$850
3. Our annual deficit:	-\$10,000
4. Our savings:	\$35,000
5. Estimated life remaining (<i>the cold equations</i>)	3 years, 6 months June, 2013

Those are the overall numbers. We can also look at them from the perspective of individual members:

	<i>Expenses</i>	<i>Income</i>	<i>Budget</i>
1. Annually per member:	\$875	\$458	-\$417
2. Monthly per member:	\$73	\$38	-\$35
3. Annually per pledging member:	\$1,235	\$647	-\$588
4. Monthly per pledging member:	\$103	\$54	-\$49

2. Options

One question we have to ask: is All Souls' situation truly terminal? Unlike Marilynn's myeloma, fiscal anorexia is not necessarily a mortal disease. There are treatments, but the cures are costly.

The pilot of the Emergency Dispatch Ship in the story above explored many alternatives before coming to the realization that the only acceptable solution required the death of the stowaway. The Board of Trustees of All Souls has been doing likewise. The following seem to be our options:

- **Reduce Expenses.** The Board has already trimmed operating expenses to the bone, but even if they were reduced to zero, it would not make a significant impact, even if we decided, as some churches have, to stop supporting their regional and national organizations with dues. Rent and our inability to attract new members are our challenges. We have proposed a reduction in rent to the property owner, with the incentive of an 18-month lease, but even if the proposal is accepted, it doesn't fully solve the problem.
- **Increase Revenue by Attracting New Members.** The Worship Committee has tried hard to develop a program of services and religious education that would attract new members, but so far we have been unsuccessful.
- **Increase Revenue by Increasing Realized Pledges.** The Finance Committee will try to persuade existing members to increase (and fulfill) their pledges through this year's canvas. Efforts in the past have not succeeded, and in this economy, most of our turnips have little more blood to give.

What would these alternatives accomplish?

	<i>Monthly</i>	<i>Annually</i>	<i>Result</i>
1. Renegotiate rent:	\$1100	\$13,200	-\$6,400
2. Find one-day-a-week space:	\$400	\$4,800	\$2,000
3. Increase monthly pledge by \$35 :	\$840	\$10,000	\$0
4. Increase pledging members by 20 :	\$1,000	\$12,000	\$2,000

Of course, these options could be combined in various ways: for example, if we can renegotiate the rent as we proposed, and we gained six members, we would only have to increase the average monthly pledge by \$15 to \$50.

3. Time to Build Consensus

One thing we cannot do is continue to place this responsibility solely on our Board of Trustees. The situation is too dire and the choices are too serious for that. We as a community have some hard choices to make.

Do we want to move out of permanent space into space we rent one day a week? This would solve our near-term budget problem, but many feel that this would be a significant loss to our community, and make it difficult to acquire new members.

Do we buy time by renewing our lease? This would enable us to figure out a more far-reaching solution, but at a significant loss to our reserves.

Do we want to make a special effort to acquire new members? If so, we have to do some deep soul-searching (and not the kind I am addressing in my RE class) to figure out what it is about All Souls that keeps new attendees from sticking. What part of their hopes and expectations are we failing to meet?

Do we want to dig deeper into our own individual pockets to come up with the funds needed to succeed? If so, we, all of us, have to make our own personal commitment.

Do we want to put this poor beast out of its misery and move on to other things? Not all businesses succeed, and the same is true of churches. Is it the best use of the money in our savings to expend it as rent in a futile effort to save a dying organization?

We need everyone's participation, ***your*** participation in choosing among those and possibly other options. So, how do you feel about the prospect of All Souls dying? Some people here might merely feel annoyed as they would upon learning that their favorite restaurant is going bankrupt. "Shucks, we'll have to find a new place to eat!" Some here have invested much of their emotional, spiritual and financial resources into this community, and would grieve its death as they would that of a member of their close family. Some may berate church leaders for letting the situation come to such a state. Some may snarl about members who aren't pledging "their fair share". And our individual feelings might vary among these and others from time to time. In any case I don't think the *blame game* is helpful.

I personally don't think it is time to choose the last of those options, that is, to euthanize All Souls, and I am loathe to give up our full-time space. If the building owner agrees to an 18-month lease with a reasonable rent, I think we should accept. But only if we agree to work hard together over the next year and a half to build a strategy, plan the tactics and begin a course of action whose success we can measure by the end of that lease. If we succeed, then we are on our way to health. If we don't, then we should plan the funeral.

But those are just my initial personal opinions. This is a decision we have to make together. We have to make a decision about renewing our lease before the end of the year, so we have to start talking now. What do you think we should do?

This I believe!

This I choose!

Namaste!