



# FROM DISCERNMENT, A DECLARATION

by Douglas G. Stinson

The Writing Group has created a document "A Community of Uses" that summarizes our journey through the interim process. Gently, by truth spoken through love, we have rejoiced in past successes, grieved our losses, learned from our all too human foibles, and forgiven our mistakes. We have learned what we were, what we want, and gained a glimpse of what we could become.

We have wandered our forty years in the desert. Those of us who have survived stand on the threshold of the Promised Land. What do we behold? No more than what those ancient Israelites saw: a hard land, but a *land of promise*, limited only by our imagination, skill and willingness to sweat. Or, as Swedenborg said, an opportunity to create heaven from the human race.

What will we make of this opportunity? This promise?

One summary of Swedenborgian theology can be expressed in three words: Love, Truth and Use. No one of these is sufficient in and of itself. We are comfortable with Love, and perhaps even with Truth. But what is the *Use* of our Shrine, our Congregation, our Ministries?

Some insight can be gained from the question asked at the January 10, 2010 congregational gathering: "What one word best describes what you want in your next minister?" The answers:

- *Teacher / Educator*
- *Preacher*
- *Advisor*
- *Contemplative*

Here are some words that were not spoken:

- *Social activist*
- *Prophetic*
- *Firebrand*

Everything we are looking for in a minister is inwardly focused.

We also learned we have virtually no visibility to those outside the denomination. Even our neighbors are unaware that there is an active congregation in this church.

Does this justify the cynics' view that what we really do is run a wedding chapel to generate money to pay for a minister, a gardener and a dishwasher so we can come once a week, enjoy a beautiful space and hear an uplifting message? Are we a "consumer church" that doesn't even fully pay for what we consume?

We are repelled by this characterization. But remove the sarcasm, pretty it up and, secretly, isn't that what we want?

Maybe not.

When asked to pick a verb that best describes the church's Use, that same congregational gathering selected from a list of hundreds, the following:

- *Love*
- *Connect*
- *Inspire*
- *Serve*
- *Embrace*
- *Enlighten*
- *Renew*
- *Communicate*
- *Illuminate*
- *Grow*

Connections are immediately apparent between these words. For example:

- *Serve* is the action
- *Love, embrace, communicate, and connect* is how we relate to one another
- *Enlighten, illuminate, inspire, renew and grow* is how we repent, reform and regenerate.

These words also form a spiral of spiritual growth:

Inspired by God's *love*, we *embrace* and *connect*; *communicate* in order to *enlighten, illuminate* and *inspire* people to *renew* and *grow* into a greater and more fulfilling experience of God's *love*. This is how we *serve*.



This interpretation inspired this logo.

Unite the words describing what we want in our next minister with our multiple interpretations of the verbs describing our Use and we discover something as beautiful as it is rare: a community and a place that inspires spiritual growth and a theology that offers truth and love, that engages the head and the heart, the left-brain and the right-brain. Or as one parishioner said "we are the church where thinking people cry."

But what does this look like in action in the world? Here are some thoughts from the January 10<sup>th</sup> congregational gathering:

"Our mission is to contribute as much of our individual selves and our individual strengths as we can to continue this place and this community as a sanctuary and a place to learn."

"We've gotten into the mode of being passive recipients; we have to move to being active creators of the experience."

This is a good start, but it does not address the question "what is our footprint beyond the garden?"

Those of us who found our way here through the wedding ministry rightly have strong emotional ties to that ministry and see it as our church's doorway to the world. But frankly, of those who have experienced our wedding ministry, statistically few have continued their relationship with the church. When we were the only church that offered rites and sacraments to the Gay and Lesbian community we were well known for that Use. But today we are hardly unique in providing that service.

The question of "our footprint outside the garden" was also answered at the congregational gathering:

"Love and theology should be our guide to Use and a beacon to the outside world."

"If our mission is to create an environment where people can experience our unique path to spiritual growth, are we content to take the attitude 'we managed to find our way here, others can do the same'? Can we *afford* that attitude? Or is the way we can *be* in the world the way of actively offering others our experience *in the world*."

And perhaps most pragmatically

"The Swedenborgian theology, this space, and, dare I say, our humility, creates a unique, safe environment for people of many faiths, or of no faith, to gather and talk about important, even perilous, issues."

We have taken our first steps at pursuing these Uses. Those efforts deserve celebration and admiration. We have ideas for next steps, but they are not formed. Our work is a journey, not a destination. We desire a spiritual leader to join us on this journey.

We are cognizant that there is a physical and human infrastructure that supports our mission. A roof must be kept over our heads, the lights kept on and payroll made. Part of what creates our unique spiritual environment is a historic structure that requires care and maintenance. We operate a wedding ministry. Together these form a business and a complex one at that. Professional management is required.

Our future success depends on us placing our fears behind us, standing up and declaring who we are, what we want to be and what we require in order for us to achieve our potential. Rebirth, no less than birth itself, is painful and messy. Making people comfortable is not our goal. Making the future is. Our period of discernment is over. Here is our declaration.

- We believe there is a large and growing segment of the population for whom the Swedenborgian theology of Love, Truth and Use resonates. The primary responsibility of the next minister is to facilitate the spiritual growth of those residing in the San Francisco Bay Area so that they will discover and fulfill their use in the world.
- We believe only through the active participation of the congregation can our Use as a Church be achieved. The church provides a supportive environment within which we practice and refine our individual uses in a way that furthers the collective Use of the Church.
- We believe our historic sanctuary is inspired and inspiring. It differentiates us from other churches and is one of our primary tools for achieving our mission.
- We understand that our spiritual enterprise is a complex business. It is likely not the responsibility of the minister to run this business. However, the minister must enthusiastically collaborate with whomever has that responsibility.
- We are a congregational polity and the Church Council, as the Congregation's elected representatives, takes seriously its responsibility for setting church policy and enforcing standards of ethical and fiscal responsibility. Any minister of the society must be sufficiently self-assured and self aware as to be able to work constructively with a strong council.
- We reject that notion that "the pool of ministers is small, you will accept what you can get" as a failure of imagination, and a failure this church (and the denomination) can ill afford.

## From Discernment, a Declaration: The Author's Statement

Perhaps it would be useful to provide some background on the origin of the document *From Discernment, a Declaration*.

After the last congregational meeting the atmosphere of optimism, enthusiasm and readiness was palpable. I began to wonder: what was the source of that optimism?

I reviewed the flip charts, listened to the recording, meditated and reviewed the recording again. You, too, can review these at

- <http://www.keepandshare.com/doc/1672170/10-01-rich-tafel-gathering-with-congregation-1-10-10>
- <http://www.keepandshare.com/doc/1687389/2010-jan-10th-congregation-gathering-1of2-mp3-12-8-meg>
- <http://www.keepandshare.com/doc/1687388/2010-jan-10th-congregation-gathering-2of2-mp3-26-4-meg>

It was obvious to me that there was great potential roiling below the surface, yearning to be given form, to be given substance.

Eventually a future became clear, a future in which visiting ministers hold enthralled not five, but 50 ... or 500. Where the leaders of the local Muslim and Jewish communities argue constructively in Lea Parks' "Holy Land, Common Ground" sessions, where architects and historians gather to ponder the interplay of architecture and spirituality, where Mehmet Oz chairs a workshop of local medical researchers and religious leaders on the influence of faith on healing.

What is preventing us from realizing this future? Many small factors of course, but in front of them all is our *belief* that it is beyond our capacity and our *fear* that the striving will disturb some among us.

With that revelation, the words flowed on to the page. Tension was built and released, built and released, reaching a crescendo as we firmly reject our self-imposed limitations.

I don't know if any of the scenarios I dreamt will come to pass, perhaps our future holds something completely different. And so I did not put any specific proposals in my document. But I do know that we can become as relevant to the community today as Worcester's church was in his day, and we can do this without proselytizing or betraying our essence, if only we first cast off the twin albatrosses of fear and self-doubt.

-- Douglas G. Stinson