



EMERGING MINISTRIES CASE STUDY | SPRING 2015

Beloved Café

Brew Justice. Pour Love. Serve Life.

Case Study: Beloved Café

Beloved Café is an idea, the concept of a third space between work and home where spiritual community is formed in a variety of ways in a working for-profit coffee shop. The original vision was to launch a series of coffee shops infused with UU values and open for workshops, classes, meetings and events that reflect those UU values. The founders planned to open the first café in the San Francisco Bay Area of California. While the project did not come to fruition, there is much to be learned from the endeavor and the hope for similar ministries in the future lives on.

Overview

Beloved Café is a term that Peter Olandt dreamed up in 2010, as he and his partner Dara Olandt explored possibilities for creative ministry at Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, CA. In 2012 Pete and Dara teamed up with another seminary couple: Marcus and Emily Hartnett-Liefert and the four of them began working on bringing Pete and Dara's idea into fruition.

They received grants from the UU Funding Panel and spent six months networking with Unitarian Universalists all over the Pacific Central District and beyond, participating in the new conversation about congregations and beyond, sparked by Peter Morales' 2013 paper by that name. They did fundraising through indiegogo and local events and brought Francis Prevot, a UU lay leader and former seminarian, onto their team to assist with the business plan. A few other non-UU individuals, including a chef, also joined the team for various periods in 2013-14.

The planning led to incorporating as a "benefit corporation," an emerging corporate structure that allows a business to focus on profit while also holding firm to certain values, without the profit becoming the bottom line. The goal was to create self-sustaining profit-producing businesses firmly rooted in UU values and serving as ministry sites.

In the winter of 2013/14 the core members of the team recognized a conflict in vision as well as the difficulties of starting a business while a large portion of the core team worked in or searched for full-time ministry positions. It became clear that the original vision was unworkable due to the conflict and constraints of logistics, but the conversations that happened because of Beloved Café remain incredibly valuable to our movement.

Early Planning and Discernment

When Pete and Dara were getting started they did significant research of similar projects, which continued as Emily and Marcus joined. They found examples of churches with their own cafes as well as independent café organizations with a justice bent, such as Recovery Café in Seattle which focuses on recovery from addiction and Same Café in Denver which focuses on food justice.

During the first six months of planning another major focus was communicating the idea of Beloved Café to Unitarian Universalists and building a network of support. This support was built through preaching gigs around the Bay Area, the creation of a website, presenting workshops at UU conferences, creating business cards to distribute, and generally leveraging professional and social connections.

During the early planning stage the group spent time discerning whether to focus on running programs in existing cafes in order to continue to build support for the idea and prove the concept, or whether to build the initial capital and infrastructure for their own café. The group chose the latter, primarily motivated by economic concerns, the desire to pay their staff a living wage and to move toward a “beloved economy” by using fair labor standards and environmentally sustainable practices. They believed that establishing a profit-producing café as soon as possible was the key to their long-term sustainability. They also hoped that some of the profits could be set aside to fund future emerging ministries of a similar nature.

Fundraising and Financial Sustainability

Starting a café, and even more so a chain of cafes, requires a lot of capital. Estimates for the capital needed to undertake the project fully ranged from 150,000 for one café to 800,000 for a series of cafes. As the group got started with fundraising they received a 10,000 matching grant and a 5,000 flat grant from the UU Funding Program, followed by an 8,000 grant specifically designed to start programming. They also did an indiegogo campaign that raised about 4,000 and hosted a house fundraiser that brought in another 1,000. During this time the UU Church of Berkeley served as their fiscal agent.

The team chose to incorporate as a benefit corporation which is a fairly recent legal structure. Benefit corporations are legal in 27 states and 14 more states are working on adding them into state law. These for profit corporations are characterized by accountability to stakeholders as well as to values and the environment, along with increased levels of transparency. Actually functioning as a profitable business was key to their financial sustainability plan, and the corporation would allow them to pursue that goal while also staying true to their values. They were planning to sell small shares to a large pool of investors as a fundraising strategy in the late fall of 2013, when conflict over vision and ownership prevented the group from moving forward with that strategy.

Successes

The biggest success of Beloved Café is that the planning team had a big hand in shaping our movement-wide conversations about “Congregations and Beyond.” Their concept of a third place where our faith could be practiced helped others to imagine what the “beyond” piece of congregations and beyond looks like. It gave UUs a concrete example to work with as well as raising the profile of the discussion in general, especially in the Pacific Central District. They also interfaced with other nascent UU projects, such as the crowd-funding platform Faithify, which is a solid step in the right direction toward more collective buy-in for our innovative ministries.

Another success is that everyone involved in the project learned a lot about what it takes to make such a project a success. This learning can be used by each individual in their lives as UU lay leaders and ministers and can also be used by other organizers in future similar endeavors.

Challenges and Setbacks

One of the biggest challenges was the limited amount of time the group had collectively available to work on the initiative during the planning and development and the expectation that they would do this work as volunteers. At different points there were different team members who were working less and were able to devote more time to Beloved Café, but it was difficult for everyone to balance the jobs they were getting paid for with this new initiative that was not yet profitable. Group decision-making took a lot of time, which meant that activities such as developing the business plan, fundraising, programming and outreach had even more limited time resources allotted.

Another challenge was the limited business experience of the majority of the planners. Four of the core team members met in seminary and had ministerial orientations without backgrounds in managing or creating businesses. These planners saw the spiritual side more clearly than the business side, and were less skilled in assessing the state of the market or networking with bigger investors.

The conflict over vision among the core planners was a major setback. There was a disagreement about how much ownership any individual on the core team could take, both financially and managerially and this conflict proved irreconcilable, leading to a separation of the team, when one board member sought to make a significant personal financial contribution in exchange for shares in the corporation.

A final setback resulted from major transitions in the lives of the planner as they sought meaningful sustainable employment. Beginning in Fall 2013 Dara Olandt along with her husband Peter moved to Virginia for her full time ministry and in Fall 2014 Marcus and Emily Hartnett-Liefert moved to New York for a shared congregational ministry.

Future Directions

The five core Unitarian Universalist planners have all learned from this endeavor in ways that will likely influence their professional ministry (for the three who are ordained ministers) or their lay leadership. These individuals are now in three different locations across the country, carrying the passion that got them involved in this endeavor to various UU communities. In addition to their personal formation, we as a Unitarian Universalist movement can continue to learn from this project as we support similar endeavors and live more deeply into our commitment to exploring new ways of living our faith.