

## REVIEW OF RECENT AND PAST GROWTH

**Finding:** The data, even recognizing its limitations, easily supports **a goal of**

### 505 by 05

#### What numbers do we have to measure growth?

The data on membership over the years are not the best. The numbers are hard to get, may not be of consistent quality, may be subject to debate, and may not be strictly comparable from year to year.

However, that said, the best series of data at hand appear to be those compiled by Dwight Sanders from the church archives. He readily admits that our records are very poor but contends his series is the best available. The numbers mostly reflect membership counts used for annual meetings and were likely those reported to the AUA.

#### Do the numbers tell us anything?

To the extent these numbers reflect reality, they suggest that our membership has been, at best, somewhat flat over the last few decades. (The average for the late 60's decade is 314 but only 270 for the 90's.<sup>1</sup>) What makes this particularly disheartening is that the Des Moines area population grew substantially over this time. Not only have our membership fallen somewhat, our market share has halved since 1970.

While statistical studies suggest that an average Unitarian church has 4.77 members per thousand of community population, we fall well short of this benchmark. In 1970 we had 1.2 members per thousand. Our market share fell to 0.85 members per thousand for 1980, and fell further to 0.65 members per thousand for 1990 on. Not only is our share of the religious market woefully short of what's been realized on average by other Unitarian churches, but, what's worse, the downward trend over the last three to four decades is truly ominous.

Admittedly, it may be necessary to adjust the benchmark of 4.77 per 1000 to better reflect our conservative Midwestern area. However, that aside, **to simply regain our market share (of 1.2 members per 1000 population) enjoyed in the late 1960's and early 1970's means we need to increase membership from our current 281 to 525** ( $1.2 * 437 \text{ population}$ )<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The UUA sent us just a few points of data on Nov. 11, 1999. That sample of their records give our membership for 1960 at 259; 1970 at 350; 1980 at 276; 1990 at 270; and 1995 at 282. This series is consistent with the contention that our membership has fallen in absolute terms since the 70's as suggested by Dwight Sanders' more extensive data series.

<sup>2</sup> See accompanying chart and graph.

SMSA Population versus Membership

