

The Potential of Unitarian Universalism

Large Church Conference

March 16, 2008

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Culture Shifts

- ★ Expectations of Volunteers
- ★ Centralized Governance
- ★ Growth of Staff
- ★ From Service to Constituents to Service to Mission

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Focus on Mission

- ★ Who are we?
- ★ Why do we gather?
- ★ What purpose do we serve?
- ★ Who are we accountable to?
- ★ What is our unique identity?



Covenantal Relationship

- ★ What is in the best interest of the congregation and its mission?
- ★ Movement from “what about me?” to “what about us?”
- ★ Developing skills of “holy curiosity”
- ★ Movement from scarcity to abundance
- ★ Movement from “do as you please” to “high expectation”
- ★ Community is not defined only by who is among us now



Balancing Act

- ★ “I” – Who am I? What do I need? What can I ask for? How am I responsible? How should I respond? What are my patterns?
- ★ “We” - How do we stay connected? How do we challenge one another? How do we disagree? Who are we in conflict?
- ★ “Larger Vision” – How do we reconcile our differences to serve a larger vision?



Where do we stand?

- ★ Glass is half full:
- ★ Growth every year for last two decades
- ★ ARIS Survey - 630,000 identified as UUs in 2001; compared with 502,000 in 1990
- ★ 42% of UU congregation grew by 10% or more between '95 and '00



Where do we stand?

- ★ Glass is half empty:
- ★ Comparison to 1968: 282,000 UUs;
2004 - 218,000
- ★ Aggregate decline of 7%
- ★ 1.5% of congregations account for 24%
of growth in denomination
- ★ 30% of congregations have shrunk by
10% or more in last decade



Comparison to Others

- ★ Presbyterians - aggregate decline of 50.1%
- ★ Methodists - aggregate decline of 52%
- ★ UCC - aggregate decline of 60%
- ★ Evangelicals - growth by 50% or more



Unaffiliated

- ★ 16.1% of American population (compared to 8% in 1980s)
- ★ Mostly men (25% compared to 13%)
- ★ Relatively young (31% under 30 and 71% under 50)
- ★ *NOT* necessarily secular or atheistic (6.4% still consider themselves religious)
- ★ 4% who grew up unaffiliated now in a congregation



“Winners and Losers”

★ Winners:

- ★ Protestant Evangelicals
- ★ Unaffiliated
- ★ Foreign-born Catholics and Catholic converts

★ Losers:

- ★ 31.4% Americans raised Catholic; 23.9% identify as current Catholics
- ★ Mainline Protestants



Transient and Diverse

- ★ 44% have left religion of their birth
- ★ 34% families are multi-religious
- ★ Denominational affiliation is much less meaningful



The Multi-Generational Church

- ★ Church Elders: everyone should do their duty
- ★ Baby Boomers: everything is a movement to be joined
- ★ Youngers: expectations of multiple choices, excellence and preparedness
- ★ Multi-taskers: everything is complex but simplifiable; looking for connection beyond the technology¹²



Culture Shifts

- ★ From Order to Chaos
- ★ From the Atom to the Bit
- ★ From One Truth to Many Truths
- ★ From the War Out There to the War In Here
- ★ From the Traditional Family to the Multifamily
- ★ From the Job to the Task
- ★ From Religion to Spirituality



Attributes of Growing Congregations

- ★ Growing Surrounding Communities
- ★ Newer Congregations
- ★ Racial Diversity



Attributes of Growing Congregations

- ★ Different Understanding of Family
- ★ Younger Age / Young Adults
- ★ Participation of Children
- ★ Gender Balance



Attributes of Growing Congregations

- ★ "Close but not too close"
- ★ Openness to change
- ★ Lack of Conflict
- ★ Understanding of Different Kind of Volunteer



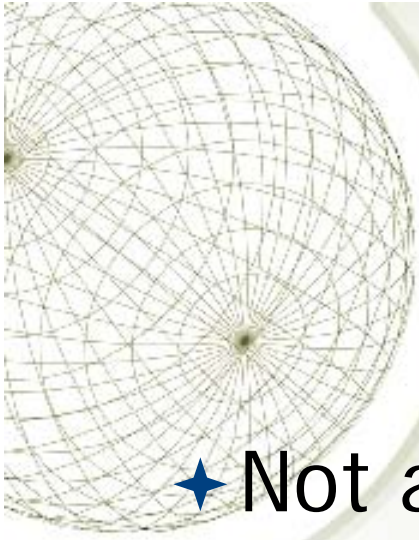
Attributes of Growing Congregations

- ★ Denomination doesn't matter
- ★ Purpose / sense of mission
- ★ Spiritual Vitality
- ★ "Make a Joyful Noise"



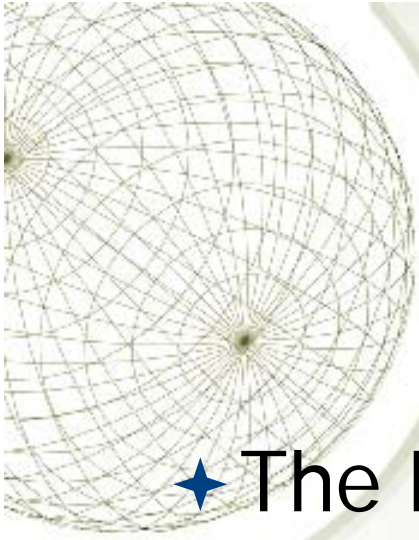
Quality Characteristics

- ◆ Empowering Style of Pastoral Leadership
- ◆ Gift-oriented lay ministry
- ◆ Passionate spirituality
- ◆ Functional structures
- ◆ Inspiring worship
- ◆ Small groups relating faith to life
- ◆ Loving relationships
- ◆ Need-oriented outreach (about them, not us)



Why Grow?

- ★ Not a need but a want
- ★ Spiritual basis, not practical
- ★ Desire to include, engage and invite
- ★ Resisting change saps energy
- ★ Commonality and difference - open to the mystery



“Incarnational Growth”

- ★ The Power of Curiosity
- ★ Abandon preconceptions
- ★ Recognize we can learn something
- ★ Risk being “intrusive”
- ★ True engagement



Personal Growth = Congregational Growth

- ★ Clarity of Purpose: related to people's lived experience
- ★ Relationship between mission and worship
- ★ Opportunities for spiritual growth in daily life
- ★ Meet people where they are
- ★ Small Group experience



Implications for Staff

- ★ Centralized accountability
- ★ Decentralized authority
- ★ “Leader to the Leaders”
- ★ Staffing for growth



Implications for Lay Leaders

- ★ Tolerance for Disagreement; complaints are normative
- ★ Leaders can be scapegoats for discomfort, or can create learning space for everyone
- ★ Learn to move to the balcony
- ★ Work descriptively: speak to the interests and values not the positions
- ★ Install civility

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Implications for Congregation

- ★ Flexible Governance
- ★ Opportunities to Listen /Learn
- ★ Decisions that Matter
- ★ Trusting Leadership
- ★ Direct Communication
- ★ Willingness to Experiment / Change



Potential for Future

- ★ Volunteers who are motivated
- ★ Greater motivation for giving
- ★ Less burden for leaders
- ★ “Could” not “Should”
- ★ Influence on larger community
- ★ Relevance to daily living



Resources

- ★ *Why Liberal Churches Are Growing*, edited by Martyn Percy and Ian Markham, T&T Clark, 2006
- ★ FACTS on Growth, Hartford Seminary, hartsem.edu
- ★ Religious Landscape Study, Pew Forum, 2008
- ★ mbduua.org
- ★ tcooley@uua.org