

**Essay Title:** Repel Fewer Newcomers      **Audio Essay Series:** Disc 1, Track 18

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A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO I STARTED WONDERING about how many visitors come to our churches. I found out that nobody knows. Even that, I find fascinating. Here we are, a movement that is made up of over 80 percent of people who were not born Unitarian Universalists. Converting visitors into members is our life blood. And yet we don't know how many visitors we have. Lots of our churches do not bother to count visitors.

I DID know how many we had at the church I served in Colorado, because we DID count. In the course of a year we had about twice as many visitors as we had members. When we counted we had 500 members and we averaged about 20 visitors a week. We figured we had close to a 1000 a year! I started checking informally with colleagues across the country. What I learned is that many congregations easily get more visitors in a year than we have members. Most churches tell me they get about one-and-a-half times to twice as many visitors as they have members.

Well, let's do a little math. Let's say our churches average just over one-and-a-half times as many visitors a year as they have members. Remember, we are talking about an average of three visitors a week for a church of 100. I estimate that we have about 250,000 visitors a year, spread across all our congregations. That is about 5,000 visitors a week. I used to think, years ago, that we needed to work to attract visitors. The truth is that we have hordes of visitors.

And who are these people? These are people who are looking for a place to connect. Another thing I have learned as a parish minister is how many of our newcomers already know a lot about us. Many have visited our web sites. In my church a surprising number have already read some of my sermons and recognize me because they have seen my picture on the web site. Our visitors are not people who got lost looking for the Baptist church or the Methodist church or the synagogue. And they are not people who come because they could think of nothing better to do that Sunday. Going to a strange church for the first time is a big decision. Our visitors make a conscious and courageous decision to visit an unknown church! Our newcomers are people who already share our progressive world view and who are looking for a place to belong. *They are us.* And they come every single Sunday. Thousands of them come to us. We don't need to do any outreach in order to grow. We need to do something much harder. We need to reach out to the people who come to us every week – the religiously homeless that are looking for spiritual shelter, the spiritually hungry who are looking for sustenance in religious community.

Let me put it as crassly as I can: In order to grow your congregation and my congregation and this movement of ours we just need to repel fewer newcomers. That's it. It is really that simple. We just need to repel fewer newcomers.

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Why does a movement that says it wants to grow and that has hundreds of thousands of people ready to join it stay so small?

What are the barriers between us and the future we say we want? What can we do to make that future of vital, welcoming, growing churches a reality?

The answer is religion. Really. Religion. And more specifically, *religious community*. We have tried all kinds of things, mostly to little or no avail. Ironically, and tragically, we have never tried religion as a growth strategy.

The key barrier for us is not organizational. The key barrier is not financial. The key barrier is us.

The challenge before us, in every single one of our congregations, is religious and spiritual.

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