

Using Video to Grow

A Workshop given to the Large Church Conference

By the Revs Christine Robinson and Ron Hersom of Albuquerque, New Mexico

SLIDE 1 (NM Mountains)

I'm Christine Robinson. I'm the senior minister at First Unitarian; a UU congregation which meets in Albuquerque, Socorro, and Edgewood, New Mexico.

New Mexico is a beautiful state, mountains and deserts, rural, scattered population of about two million people in an area about the size of New England. Nearly half live in the Albuquerque metro area, the rest scattered all over. An awful lot of New Mexico Terrain looks like this:

Slide 2 (NM Scene)

First Unitarian was founded in 1949, by people who were so glad to have a liberal religious alternative that keeping the doors open for new people is a part of our DNA. Congregation grew steadily as the city grew, called its first minister in the mid 1950's, purchased land, built a building and served about 400 members through the 1980's. 500 members through the '90's, and we have 730 members now.

We're blessed to be a healthy faith community in a growing city. We believe that part of our job is to welcome the people who come to us hungry for our liberal faith and we do that as best we can. For the last couple of years, we've been using video as a growth tool and we've enlarged our vision to include not only the spiritually hungry of Albuquerque, but those in small towns around us. We have developed two branches. One in Socorro, 70 miles south of us, and one in Edgewood, 30 miles east.

SLIDE 3 (NM Map)

We believe that we have a model for the development of Unitarian Universalism into the rural areas of America that might bring the blessings of our faith into communities where a few people are hungering for what we have to offer but who have never been served. How big an audience is that? Let me just show you a map.

Slide 4 (US Map)

This map shows the distribution of UU's in that nation from about 1% of the population...that's those deep purple dots, mostly in New England, through medium purple, that's three to six tenths of the population, to our "normal", pink distribution of one tenth of one percent of the population in the service areas of our congregation to...white, which is no presence.

There's a lot of white on that map...places where religious liberals are members of CLF, or travel 80,100,200 miles to go to church, or mostly likely...don't have a religious community in their life at all. Some of those are the 1 million people who tell themselves they are UU's even though our numbers are actually only a quarter of that.

The Video Project (Ron)

I'm Ron Hersom. I was the intern at First Unitarian as we began to develop our skill with video, and now I'm the Acting Assistant Minister. The development of branches is the last and most complex of our video projects, so lets go back a few notches.

In the Winter of 2006, we were given a grant from a forward looking family to purchase video equipment. We have a video professional in our congregation and we began to talk to him about what we could realistically do.

What we learned about video

- one camera is easy. If it is mounted and hooked up properly, one volunteer operator can handle the whole recording operation.
- more than one camera is really hard. That takes two operators and an editor, editing software, and a lot of time and expertise.
- One camera can't capture a worship service with much quality, but one camera can capture an "ordinary" sermon. It's just a talking head but even a "talking head" is compelling if it is large enough. We learned that if your talking head is about 110% the size of a real head, people will pay attention.
- That means using a video projector to project the video to all but the smallest groups.
- That also means that the rest of the worship service...the songs, meditation, the offering, the readings...all that has to be done live, by a worship leader.

After digesting this news, we decided to start recording sermons and to use the recordings in several ways. Because many of our projects involve the internet, we called this our iministry project and have had an enthusiastic committee working ever since.

Slide 5 (booth long shot)

You can see in this picture a part of our iministry set-up. We use one, wall mounted camera which is remotely operated. You can see it in the upper left corner.

Slide 6 (booth closeup)

Our audio and video techs work together in a booth that has been affectionately named the starship Enterprise. In this slide you see their set-up, including the camera monitor in the corner.

Slide 7 (What we Do with Video)

Our first project was to procure TV's for the two lounges which are adjacent to our sanctuary so we could simulcast the service for differing needs and overflow. We've got a room for parents and restless children, and a second room for adults with special needs. We tried wireless transmission and ended up running wire when we discovered that our walls are solid. The folks in these lounges can keep their doors open and hear the service. When there is someone at the pulpit, they see that person. Incidentally, after we installed the TV's, there was a call to add a VCR for adult programs during the week.

Slide 8 (website home)

We create several different files of the video. Two are posted to our website;

Slide 9(website sermon page)

one in Windows format and one for Apple and Ipod users. We also post audio files and text files as you see. Anyone coming to our site can download and view these files. In addition, we've set up a podcast, so that people who know how to do this can automatically download sermons each week along with the other podcasts they like to listen to.

Among the many benefits of doing this is that it helps people get to know us. We've realized that these days, most people who come in the door already know that they believe as we do.

We're also aware that these files are viewed by UU's from other churches, from our members who are on business trips, by a person who has extreme environmental sensitivities, and by our preachers and interns who watch themselves and weep....and learn!

Slide 10 (Youtube Video Page)

As YouTube has exploded on the scene, we've experimented with posting our short sermons to YouTube. Videos posted to YouTube must be less than 10 minutes long, so not every sermon will work. However we've posted one very short sermon...

This slide was taken when this video had been posted for two months; as you can see, it has been viewed by 993 people. That's a lot of publicity!

YouTube is not a very good venue for the average sermon, but next month, we're planning a YouTube Sunday. We're asking our members to suggest questions or topics they'd like to see answered on YouTube, our ministers will pick four or five of them and answer them in short segments, suitable for posting to YouTube, on Sunday morning. We're expecting to have fun with that and double the number of UU Videos currently available on this fast-growing portion of the internet.

Slide 11 "What We Do With Video"

We also take the video file and make a very high resolution, very large file. That very large file is necessary if the video is to be projected. The videos which are posted to the website would look terrible if they were blown up to wall size. We use this large file for video assisted worship.

You're probably aware of projection-assisted worship, where things like hymn words are projected for a congregation, or a video is shown instead of a reading. That's interesting stuff but we don't do it, we do video assisted worship.

In video assisted worship, a worship leader and musicians conduct a service... chalice lighting, songs, readings, meditation, offering, and so on, but when it comes to the sermon, down comes a screen and the sermon is delivered via video, using a file made at an earlier hour.

Some people are very suspicious of this; they think that they would feel alienated or bored by video preaching. But it is surprisingly compelling. I want to show you an example. This is a clip from a sermon on paganism; one point Christine made about what Paganism can teach UU's.

Switch to Windows Media Player w. alt/tab
Maximize video picture w. arrow in bottom rt. corner
Push Play

I hope that gives you an idea of what a video sermon might be like. Of course, it's not the same as being there...but it's surprisingly vivid.

Alt/Tab to return to Slide 11

We're facilitating Video Assisted worship in three ways.

First of all, we have a deal for lay-led congregations, which so often have difficulty filling their pulpits with guests, and especially have difficulty staying in touch with the denomination. So we choose four sermons a year...the sort of UU 101 sermons Fellowship folks don't get to hear, record them, copy them to DVD's, add printed readings, children's stories, and hymn suggestions, and sell them to our subscribing congregations. For \$100, they get 4 services, ready-to-go. Of course, they have to have a DVD player and a projector. We have about a dozen congregations who use this service, and we've done a really bad job of advertising! And here's a hint; the congregations who use these DVD's would like more. But we're maxed out on this project. Four a year is all we can do. If another church that was proud of its preacher and was video recording sermons did the same thing, a small congregation could hear two different voices of UU ministers regularly. And that would be a great way to help

our Fellowships stay more connected to Unitarian Universalism.

Here's what one subscriber wrote us in an email:

I want to make sure you know how very much our church is enjoying the DVD series you are producing. We did the trial one last spring and have now shown the two on our Unitarian and Universalist backgrounds. They have been extraordinarily well received and produced beneficial conversations. As a leader of a small church, I can say this is one of the best things offered to help us grow.

Please express our appreciation to Rev Robinson.

When is the next one coming... we are anxious!!

Judith Kirk
Unitarian Universalist of Casper
Casper WY

The second thing we do with the large video file is to hold a third service on our campus. This is our Video Café project, and it serves about 30 people a week.

Slide 12 "Video Café-Goals"

We had a crowding problem at our second service, and we solved it for a couple of years with this small group service which meets in our social hall during the same time. We thought that the combination of informal and techie would attract young adults who are supposed to like such things, but after a few weeks, it became clear that our high-tech worship venue was appealing to people who like discussion and sharing....ie, this is our Fellowship.

The Goals for the Video Café project were

1. To accommodate growth and alleviate crowding at the second service.
2. To offer a more informal, participational worship style
3. To learn to use the technology so we could serve branches in other places.

Slide 13 Video Café Boundaries

We wanted to make sure that the Video Café and the main worship services were different but had the same DNA, or core values . So we made the decisions you see on the slide...basically clarifying that these are two programs of one church. One consequence of the Video Café is that we have to save all of our strange and wonderful, but not sermon-centered worship services for the late Spring and Summer, or make other arrangements for the Video Café congregation.

Slide 14 Video Café Audience

Our Target Audience is, as you see, that Fellowship group, as well as some coffee drinkers, knitters, and Branch Ministry folks.

We started our Video Café in October 06, so it's closing up it's second year.

Slide 15 Photo: Video Cafe

We learned:

- You'd be surprised at how much traffic an "empty" room gets during a worship service!
- You need to be able to really darken the room.
- We tried to use a laptop to project both the video and things like words to hymns but found it just too complex for volunteers. So we bought a second set of hymnals and a DVD player.
- We still serve coffee and group the chairs around little patio tables.
- Small Group Worship is a learned Skill
- The Worship leader has the text of the sermon so it can be read if necessary.
- Once you install a video projector, you'll wonder how you ever did without it.

Christine:

Finally, we were ready to try off-site Video Worship, to develop branches of First Unitarian in small towns in New Mexico. We really wanted to jump-start this process, and we knew that others were interested in this experiment, so we applied for a Grant from the UUA to allow us to move quickly and publicize what we learned. We got the grant and hired a branch organizer a year ago to work about 15 hours a week for 18 months to help us become a Multi-Site

congregation.

Why did we want to do that?

Slide 16 US Map

Well..you remember this map with all that white space, all those small towns in rural America which have no UU presence?

Once upon a time the answer to all that white space was Fellowships; small lay-led groups of UU's. Fellowships worked pretty well as a growth strategy in the burgeoning suburbs in the 1950's and 1960's, but has never worked well in small towns. These days, when people are looking for food for their spirits, lay lead congregations are just not very attractive to newUU's. If a Fellowship gets started, it tends to have to put huge amounts of energy into putting on a Sunday service...which they tend to call a "program," every week. The speakers they get locally are usually not in sync with their religious needs and rarely in sync with Unitarian Universalism. And, there's no energy left over for RE, for Social Justice, or for the other things churches should be doing. And sometimes small groups attract dysfunctional persons, which the group of volunteers has difficulty controlling. Without professional leadership, most groups drift into a secular, social mode, and all that makes them unattractive to new folks.

Slide 17 Branch Ministry Goals

We believed that we could solve some of those problems. A Branch of our congregation would have easy access to good worship; Worship leaders could be trained well, they could focus on doing worship well rather than finding speakers, because the speakers would be provided. They would have a spiritual focus, pastoral care, help with organizational issues and even, if necessary, problematic person issues. Their Covenant Group leaders would get training and materials. They would have all kinds of things small groups don't have; a kids camp, and an Endowment Fund.

Our Organizer started working almost immediately with two groups; one from Socorro, 70 miles south of us, and one from the rural communities on the other side of the mountains from us. The second group started meeting in one small town about 20 miles from Albuquerque and later moved further away...30 miles. That has helped. The Socorro group meets in the social hall of an Episcopal church.

Slide 18 Picture: Socorro Sign

They have about 50 adults on their role. A dozen...perhaps more... have joined the church...First Unitarian, that is. Figuring out a remote membership procedure was one of our first tasks. They pledge to the church, and the church takes care of their expenses; rent, child care workers, and so on, and provides staff support. Their

babysitter is well supplied with books from our library and an elementary curriculum for the children.

Slide 19: Socorro worship picture

They meet at 3PM every Sunday. Most weeks, they use the video that was made at our 9:30 service and uploaded to our website. They download it and play it from a laptop. Socorro is the home of New Mexico Tech, and of the Very large Array “listen to the Martians” project,

Slide 20 Photo: Very Large Array

and they are so “techie” there that they have been able to help the Albuquerqueans! About half of them are “old” UU’s and half of them are new. Amongst the “old” UU’s is a very elderly lady who, grew up in a Unitarian Church in New England and, as a young lady, worked for the American Unitarian Association. But she married and her husband took her out to the wilds of New Mexico and she had no contact with UU’ism for half a century. She is so glad to have a church that she has put us in her will. Someone from our Endowment Committee went down to help her do that.

Slide 21 Photo: East Mountains

The group in the East Mountains, so far a smaller group, but they are growing fast. Their first meeting place was closer to Albuquerque...only about 20 miles from the church, and that, it seemed, was too close. Now they meet about 30 miles from Albuquerque and are starting to thrive. They meet in the classroom of a knitting store. Like all of our branches, and several towns where we have explored branches, we’ve used advertising based on the current UUA publicity campaign.

Slide 22 (Ad Campaign)

We are actively working on a branch in a far suburb of Albuquerque called Belen. We’ve worked with persons in three other towns with interesting results so far. One thing we’ve come to realize is that towns which have had a UU Fellowship in the past which has struggled and become defunct have not responded well to our overtures. We also had one very promising group stolen out from under us; after our ad campaign a group of about 30 people met with our organizer, and one very strong-willed resident convinced the group that being a Fellowship would be much more fun. As far as we know, they have not yet had a first meeting. We may go back again one day!

Slide 23: Branch Ministry Boundaries

We had to reassure our neighboring congregations that we were not going to compete with them, but the real work of the Branch project ‘at home’ is figuring out how to make sure that the Branch folks feel like they are real members of the church. We’ve purchased a device called a poly com which facilitates conference calls, and the

Socorro Covenant group leader meets with the other covenant group leaders that way. We'll use the same device to connect Socorro with the church's annual meeting.

Slide 24 (donation photo)

Our Socorro branch solicits spare change at the offering and gives it away, just like we do in Albuquerque. Three months after they'd started meeting, they made their first donation, to their local Food Bank. That donation purchased all of the food they'd need for three weeks.

To me, this illustrates one of the great joys of being a UU in a small town. This Branch of our church has been very visible. They offered a Holiday Concert to their community, they have a great relationship with the Episcopal church, they jointly host a meditation group and they are on the radar of the Food Bank. In a town of 10,000 residents, a group of 50 can make a real splash. Most exciting of all, they are growing in spirit together rather than sitting at home feeling isolated in a small town. They are effusively grateful for this initiative and for the opportunity to be a part of a big church.