

# **Congregational Growth in Unitarian Universalism**



**New Congregation and Growth Resources  
Unitarian Universalist Association  
2005**

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**Important note for searching UUA.org:** All UUA resources mentioned are available in the Leaders section of the web site, in the Leaders' Library. Please use quotes around the title when you search to bring up the resource or item you seek.

## **Why Grow?**

Growth is inevitable in healthy congregations. To be a healthy congregation is to develop responses that are sound and reasonable. To be healthy is to be vigorous, to have strength, and to use these qualities in taking action. When a congregation sees clearly its place and possibilities and understands its mission and purpose, it will make decisions that serve itself and its community well. Such a congregation will continue growing because of its health. Such a congregation is ready to serve people who need Unitarian Universalism.

Congregational health and well-being are topics of much interest to all religious communities. Because health and growth are related, growth should be a topic of equal interest and study. Practitioners, academics, and religious leaders are studying growth of religious communities. Good information and resources exist and are accessible to every Unitarian Universalist with an interest in learning more. In this text, we distill and review practical findings related to healthy congregational growth.

The most basic and practical understanding a religious leader must have about growth is that it is a necessary condition for the continuation of any religious community. Not to grow leads to death. A congregation that is not growing in wisdom, strength, action, or numbers is a congregation that will not last in its present state. In a congregation that has virtually stopped growing, something must change—some new shoot of growth must emerge to begin the turnaround and return to vigor. If you are a leader involved in a typical congregation, however, the appearance of green shoots of growth is a regular occurrence. They happen. The important question to answer is, How does one tend to them? As a leader, your task is to select those efforts with the best match to the mission of the congregation, to water and nurture their energy, perhaps even to prevent their being trampled, and to honor their new place in the life of the congregation.

## **Growth Is Natural**

There is a natural wisdom in growth. As one area of growth results in new abilities and understandings, insights emerge that lead congregations to learn more and do more. Fighting and resisting the new insights can cause energy to be expended in maintaining the status quo rather than to be spent on healthy responses to new learning. The result is burnout, disillusionment, and ultimately a compromise of the congregation's survival.

When growth in one area of the congregation stimulates growth in another area, leaders must model a hospitable response. During this time of recognition of growth, leaders must welcome the changes occurring while listening to people's concerns along the way. Suggestions for change and renewal will increase more than will the necessary commitment and ability to nurture them into reality. As a congregation, we cannot act on all of the insights gained, and no congregation, regardless of its enthusiasm, can pursue all possible changes simultaneously. It is at this time that leadership offers its greatest benefits to the congregation. Leaders look to the big picture of the congregation's mission, consider the enthusiasm and commitment that predicts successful change, and encourage openness to emerging insights and actions that are likely to enrich the life of the congregation. Leaders help the congregation set limits, within which the congregation is free to explore possibilities and accomplish effective changes as a manageable agenda of tasks and goals develops. Leading in this way allows the full interaction of growth to seek its natural level in the healthy congregation. It also reinforces the idea that congregations have an obligation to renew themselves lest they become stale, hackneyed organizations without relevance to the issues of daily life and the problems of our planet.

## **Ways of Growing**

When individuals remark that their congregation is growing, they typically mean that membership numbers are increasing. Many people define a successfully growing congregation as one with increasing membership. Growth in the number of members is one way (and is a highly visible way) in which a congregation may grow.

Loren Mead, an expert on churches and church vitality and the author of *More Than Numbers: The Way Churches Grow*, describes four types of growth possible in congregations. One type, numerical growth, dominates our awareness, but the other types are equally valid forms of growth. These forms of growth are as follows:

- Maturational growth.
- Organic growth.
- Incarnational growth.
- Numerical growth.

## **Maturational Growth: Growth in Wisdom**

Mead describes maturational growth as a stage when the congregation sees its life as a complex array of choices. Growth allows the congregation to "challenge, support, and encourage each one of its members to grow in the maturity of their faith, to deepen their spiritual roots, and to broaden their religious imaginations."

At times, maturational growth is the only option for growth. For congregations in areas of declining or aging populations, such growth creates clarity of purpose and renews the ability to undertake actions that reflect limitations. In a congregation that has attempted to "borrow" successful programs from another congregation without thought or adaptation, maturational growth returns it to a solid footing of reality. If a congregation has experienced failure in practices, programs, ministry, or staff and suspects that "wishful thinking" was at the root of the problem, growth in congregational maturity will be necessary to learn successful ways of growing.

Perhaps some of the best examples of maturational growth occur in congregations that face their closing. Most congregations face the question of closing only when they reach a phase of unpleasant communication or disillusionment. Congregations with maturational growth are able to see the problem well ahead of that negative phase, to recognize its systematic nature, and to avoid engaging in blame or hostility and instead select their own outcome.

Other examples of successful maturational growth in congregations occur when the congregation as a whole undertakes programs such as the Welcoming Congregation program or the JUUST Change antiracism consultancy program; for more information, please see [UUA.org](http://UUA.org), go to Leaders' Library, and search "JUUST change" and "Anti-racism,"\* respectively. In working through these programs, the members must do the deep and difficult work of personal change so the congregation as a whole can grow maturationally.

## **Organic Growth: Growth in Strength**

According to Mead, "Organic growth is about the task of building the community, fashioning the organizational structures, developing the practices and the processes that result in a dependable, stable network of human relationships in which we can and from which we can make a difference. . . . Organic growth is the call to shape congregations themselves to become communities that generate life and energy."

Organic growth is mission driven. It calls the congregation to strengthen the qualities needed to serve its essential purpose (mission) and to become equal to its future. Qualities and skills needed for this work could include openness, flexibility, and principled decision-making processes. Healthy organic growth means creating organizational systems that support the undertakings of the congregation. It also means equipping the leadership with skills to respond to emerging challenges. It means

awareness of what skills are resident in the congregation and what skills the congregation needs but does not possess.

When a congregation feels it has understood the challenges it is facing, has made an effort to respond, but has not been able to respond effectively, a focus on organic growth through leadership development and skill building is in order. Intentionally investing congregational energy in organic growth will pay dividends for years to come. Organic growth demands that leaders set aside the continual pressure just to do "anything" and replace it with a response to select the "something" that is the best match to the situation. Doing just "anything" to relieve leaders' and congregants' anxiety is usually ineffective. It can feed the tendency toward burnout. Doing the "right something" is more effective and is certainly more rewarding to those leaders who want to see something positive and lasting accomplished.

In effect, fostering organic growth and strengthening the habits of continual improvement are closely related. Building internal congregational systems that assume we will always need to learn is crucial to sustained congregational health. Congregations that create a culture of continual learning find that they are always involved with learning skills and acquiring knowledge, applying these skills and knowledge, and evaluating their accomplishments. Once a congregation learns a new technique, carefully applies what it has learned, and evaluates how to make improvements, it has modeled a cycle that can be repeated over and again to meet the demands of the future. Such a cycle becomes an expected process, and the habit of process becomes a part of congregational identity.

If your congregation aspires to grow larger numerically, organic growth is mandatory. Numerical growth will make systems growth mandatory, or conversely, the lack of systems growth will stop numerical growth completely. Failure to grow effective systems truncates healthy growth faster than does a too-small parking lot! If leaders do nothing more than build robust congregational systems, they will be fabulously effective.

### **Staffing for Growth**

The adage is that generals always prepare to fight the last war, meaning that it is a human tendency to assume that our next challenge will be like the previous one. It is also true that congregations usually fall into staffing for the prior stage of growth. Why does this happen? Two main causes for this lack of staffing for growth emerge: the failure to identify new challenges and the fear associated with the new expenses.

Probably chief among the reasons that staffing does not keep up with growth is the failure to identify new challenges. Expecting our problems to be like prior problems, we staff for what we know and can explain. Finding it hard to say, "I

really don't know what that role will be like a year from now," we do nothing and hope for the best. If instead we felt that our process of growing was sound, our confidence would be sound as well. We would not be slow to anticipate staffing changes; we'd expect them as normal. Congregational leaders and staff would always be busy developing new skills in themselves and the congregation. Leaders would recognize ahead of time the need to hire and train flexible and talented people. Confidence in process, as well as in the systems the leadership has put in place, engenders the congregation's confidence in the leadership's ability to identify the next directions for learning and growth.

Fear is the second most significant reason why we fail to identify new challenges and hence fail to staff for growth. Because we doubt that we can adapt to new demands and we lack commitment to the congregation's future vision, we revert to accustomed cautions to justify our fears. Primary among these cautions is the desire not to "waste" the monetary resources of the congregation.

Such a fear is nearly impossible to realize. If a new assistant director of religious education is hired when the job is still undeveloped or not fully conceptualized, he or she might use the interim time to research how families come to the congregation for the membership committee. If a new administrator joins the staff while a big renovation project is delayed, he or she might be offered the choice of taking on one of three or four neglected projects. There is always plenty of important work to do. So much habitually goes undone that it would be hard to ever overstaff. The key is staffing with growth in mind, as described in the previous examples. Have new staff focus on work that prepares for, and fosters, growth.

Moreover, what of money? One congregational consultant estimates that even in times of tight church budgets, about two thirds of congregants say they are always ready to pledge more to avoid the chaos resulting from short staffing. In conversation with one another, they retell tales of projects without enough support for proper conception and implementation. Congregants are aware of new initiatives that failed to get off the ground because no one on staff had enough time to communicate up front with those concerned. In addition, when asked, congregants admit that new programs are rarely evaluated or modified. "There is no time for feedback, for acknowledgment of a good job—no time for the thorough review that might take an ordinary program and make it a great program," said one long-time Unitarian Universalist. "What it costs the congregation to deal with such confusion . . . we never count that. We expect our members to put up with unnecessary abuse." It becomes clear that our

miserly habits can cost us dearly. Congregations that say they want to grow, and yet intentionally try to avoid supporting the necessary staffing, will soon find themselves overwhelmed and reaching a plateau in growth. A policy of staffing for growth is necessary for successful long-term growth. Leaders should work to establish "staffing for growth" as a ratified policy, building it into every budget. Once a congregation has seen the continuity and community support that results from such positive planning, they will understand how valuable a commitment of staffing for growth is to the future of the congregation.

### **Find a Mentor Congregation**

Congregations that want growth in depth of programming and number of members should identify two or more congregations in their local district that are 30 to 40 percent larger than their own present membership level. (Your district executive can help in this selection.) Such a relationship establishes a connection between a few leaders in each place and allows the smaller congregation to learn about life in the larger. If the smaller congregation's "scouts" spend two hours a month reading newsletters and Web site information and making periodic calls or even site visits, the experience will begin to color in the reality ahead. The scouts' sharing of their observations with their congregation allows the congregation to anticipate something of what is required for the future. The main advantages to the smaller congregation are the chances to avoid some errors and to learn lessons vicariously. The benefits to the larger congregation are in service to the larger movement, in learning about themselves as they reflect with others, and in the opportunity to build bridges with congregations that can then reflect back to them what the outsiders see. In this case, both congregations would be fostering their objective of creating a culture of continuous learning. For information on "breakthrough congregations," which are congregations that have inspiring stories of health and growth, please see [UUA.org](http://UUA.org), and search the topic.

### **Incarnational Growth: Growth in Action**

According to Mead, incarnational growth defines the relationship of the congregation to the environment. This type of growth shows the embodiment of the congregation's collective faith, as evident in the faith-driven actions and programs of its members.

Mead classifies four possible styles of relationship that focus in various combinations on members or the larger public, and on this world or the next. Modifying his insights for

our Unitarian Universalist perspectives, we can recast next-world focused to future-world focused. We find that Mead's model plays out for Unitarian Universalists as follows:

|                             | Member<br>Centered | Publicly<br>Proactive |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| This-<br>World<br>Focused   | CIVIC              | ACTIVIST              |
| Future-<br>World<br>Focused | SANCTUARY          | EVANGELISTIC          |

### **Mead's Model Interpreted for Unitarian Universalists**

- A civic style of relationship is a relationship of the congregation to its members, of working within the congregational system and continually seeking improvement.
- An activist style of relationship is a relationship of the congregation to the surrounding or the larger community; it entails renewing or building new inclusive systems, as well as seeking change.
- A sanctuary style of relationship is a relationship focused upon the spiritual needs of existing congregants, a way of relating that provides an interface with their spiritual life.
- An evangelistic style of relationship is a felt call to "win" others to our faith. It is bringing Unitarian Universalism to people who have not experienced it previously.

Unitarian Universalists may be tempted to disregard Mead's analysis, as it appears to be wedded to Christian theology. However, his distinctions should seem familiar to long-time Unitarian Universalists who have struggled with balancing the various needs that congregational life presents:

- The need for our congregation to decide whether we will make changes as adjustments to the system, or whether we will change the system fundamentally.
- The need for our congregation to decide to serve its members primarily, to serve individuals beyond our doors who seek spiritual growth and witness, or both.
- The commitment we make to welcome all without condition, yet to hold among the group an empowering vision.

All these issues challenge leadership to find the balance. Mead's analysis, in whatever translation, points out that there are many ways to "embody" our beliefs. Assuming that

all actions have the same focus is not consistent with fact. Churches differ radically in how they offer "faith in action," and almost all churches have persons or subgroups in all four of Mead's typologies.

The recognition of a diversity of focus is the first step in understanding incarnational growth. Understanding this diversity of focus also explains how persons who live in different quadrants can misunderstand one another. Activists wonder why the whole congregation does not turn out at scheduled protests. Don't they care? Congregants who are busy building up membership and supporting denominational activities muse on how others neglect these "ties that bind." Civic types despair over neglected relationships--or pastoral needs unmet--within the congregation, and sanctuary folks ask why there are no rituals of healing or forgiveness on the church calendar. When each type steps back to see the multiple ways of authentically moving values into action, he or she begins to understand that others are not inactive, but active differently.

For another model of understanding what motivates different individuals with differing preferences for action, refer to New Congregation Development: A Manual for District Staff and Volunteers, pages 1 through 14, where achievers, affiliators, influencers, and spirituality seekers are discussed. See the Unitarian Universalist Association Web site to see the manual, at [UUA.org](http://UUA.org) by going to the Leaders' Library and by searching "New Congregation Development."\*

Healthy incarnational growth requires that a congregation learn to trust the wisdom of many types of action. Leaders must respect all, serve all, and seek to discover how the types of incarnational growth match the mission. If a congregation is rich with activists, it must pay attention to keeping other types alive and vital. If worship and spiritual education serve the sanctuary types fully, then congregational leaders must encourage a focus on the larger community.

Members must also learn to work beyond their preferred focus. If there is to be a vital religious community, members must pair their belief with action that transcends the individual. Unitarian Universalists, as a noncreedal religion, ought to be particularly skilled at seeing and trusting the wisdom of many paths and should be encouraged to work across their comfort zones. Growth in awareness and respect for the many paths for action signals the presence of incarnational growth as a hallmark of the community.

## **Numerical Growth: Growth in Member Numbers**

Numerical growth represents the most commonly held definition of growth. Healthy congregations keep count of each of the following:

- Members.
- Religious education enrollment.
- Pledging households.
- Sunday service attendance, including adults and children.

Such counting is a good congregational practice, but remember that the counting or the count does not make the numbers grow. An example follows:

A visiting minister went to preach at what had been a small and struggling congregation. Upon her arrival, the increased number of persons at the service surprised her. During coffee hour, the minister commented on the noticeable difference in attendance and asked if it was unusual. "Oh, it is pretty typical for us now," was the answer. "People keep coming, but we don't know why."

The minister inquired further and found that the congregation had not started any new membership programs; no special advertising or promotion was under way. Only one area of change existed: New leadership had initiated several new service projects—visible projects of service and witness. The new visibility in the community and the enthusiasm of members talking about the projects were responsible for almost all of the newcomers.

Numerical growth occurs because of health in the congregation and the health of Unitarian Universalism generally. When our Unitarian Universalist congregations are busy learning, living, and loving well, a powerful attraction encourages others to get involved. Committed Unitarian Universalists relocate to new congregations, bringing new energy and skills. When we live out our liberal religious commitment to openness, amazing synergies will emerge. Conversely, when congregations resist change—clinging to old ways, trying to minimize growth, and limiting commitment and effort—numbers usually shrink.

Every congregation must serve new members, or it will die. Because all congregations will lose members through changing life circumstances and deaths, it is not possible to ignore the need to attract or serve new members in our congregations. Ignoring the need for growth and the need to respond intentionally to growth will inevitably threaten a congregation's survival. It may take as long as a generation to feel the impact, but the impact will come. Adjusting congregational life to the needs of new members keeps the congregation relevant to the wider community that it serves.

Imagine a congregation that settles in at the size of 150 members. It welcomes few new members and keeps most of the current members, who have an average age of fifty. For a generation, the population is stable (avoiding both the need for a second service or any expansion of facilities), but graying. After twenty years the membership experiences many deaths and moves to be in alternate living situations or closer to family. The pillars of the church are gone, and no one is ready to step forward to take their place. Membership shrinks, generous pledgers are gone, and the congregation is thrown into chaos for years—if it survives. In addition, the number of individuals in the congregation and the community who are able to hear our saving message are few.

Congregational consultant Charles Arn advises that U.S. churches annually average a loss of 2 to 3 percent of their members to other congregations (transfers) and 1 to 2 percent to death. His findings signal that in merely replacing lost members a congregation must add between 3 and 5 percent new members annually. What is required to replace those lost members? Research shows that there are two kinds of welcoming programs: that of congregations with nongrowing or shrinking membership and that of high-growing congregations.

### **Factors of Welcoming Visitors**

- Visitors welcomed monthly as a percentage of the congregation
- Number of interactions with visitors on first visit
- Number of ways to get involved in church life offered to visitors
- Number of congregants who establish friendships with new members
- Number of ways to communicate events in the congregation
- Number of ways to explain and orient newcomers to the congregation
- Ways to encourage visitor involvement
  
- Percentage of first-time visitors returning a second time who are likely to become members
- Percentage of second-time visitors returning a third time who are likely to become members

| <b>Low-Growing Congregations</b> |  | <b>High-Growing Congregations</b>       |
|----------------------------------|--|---|
| 10%                              |  | 20%                                     |
| 0–2                              |  | 3+                                      |
| 27 possible roles                |  | 55 possible roles                       |
| 2                                |  | 7                                       |
| 3                                |  | 9                                       |
| 2                                |  | 6                                       |
| Leaving it up to visitor         |  | Personally inviting newcomers to events |
| 21%                              |  | 38%                                     |
| 33%                              |  | 55%                                     |

From this chart, we see that different practices result in different growth rates. Congregations that are intentionally welcoming of guests, that consider their needs, and that reach out to involve them will be roughly twice as effective in welcoming new members. They can grow much faster than congregations that offer only minimal attention to the task.

Former Southwest District executive Robert Hill notes that Unitarian Universalist congregations welcome many guests over the course of a year. Typically, the number of guests equals the number of members in the congregation. Yet despite that healthy rate of visitation, our congregations grow at the rate of about one new member per

year, on average. With a median congregation size of 154 members, that is a rate of growth of approximately 0.6 percent. That's one sixth of a percent, not 6 percent.

Sometimes, perhaps out of a sense of hopelessness, our congregations' leaders say that our Association of Congregations focuses too much on numbers. They say that what is really important is whether we can keep our doors open, whether we are involved in social action, and whether there is a service on Sunday. This expression of what is important comes out of an attitude of aiming for survival, rather than of wanting to thrive.

Numerical growth can be seen as the sign of a successful religious community for several reasons. The first reason is that a single theology has generally shaped the thinking about religious communities. The dominant Christian theology of U.S. society has a mission to bring souls to salvation. Logically enough, in the business of salvation, more is better. Hence, numerical growth is often thought to be better. Unitarian Universalism arose in a tradition of historical Christianity and still welcomes many Christians and former Christians among its members. The norm for religious communities in our culture is formed around the frame of this desire to bring all possible persons into religious association.

A second reason that numerical growth is seen as an indication of success is that the U.S. population (and that of all North America) is growing, having doubled in fifty years; congregations must grow just to keep up with local growth trends. At General Assembly 2004 in Long Beach, California, Larry Ladd, Unitarian Universalist financial advisor, reflected upon congregational growth versus population growth. He found that since the merger of the faith traditions of Unitarians with Universalists, the number of Unitarian Universalists has decreased as a percentage of the general population. Also, numerically it is essentially unchanged. One might ask, If our movement shrinks, is it healthy?

A third reason that numerical growth indicates success is that such growth is energizing to the congregation. Few things energize a congregation like the welcoming of enthusiastic new members, delighted to have found Unitarian Universalism. Long-term members feel the affirmation and enrichment of the community through the involvement of new members. The welcoming of new members is joyful, whereas the loss of members is usually sorrowful. A congregation that welcomes more members than it loses will naturally feel more optimistic about its future than a congregation for whom the reverse is true.

The last reason why numerical growth is valued—and probably the most compelling reason to today's Unitarian Universalist congregations—is the recognition that our congregations are places of positive transformation. Our openness to persons of different spiritual journeys—our conviction that "we need not think alike, to love alike"—offers welcome and encouragement to individuals who want a spiritual home of diverse

thought and free inquiry. When we, as liberal religious communities, understand our congregations to be places where renewal and strength for living are found and when we know our common power to encourage growth, goodness, and giving, then we understand that sharing our faith is not optional, but a compassionate response to those who seek to live a life of integrity and service.

### **Fox Valley Vitality a Result of Innovation, Friendliness**

For much of its life, the Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Appleton, Wisconsin, was small and almost dormant. At one point, it almost passed out of existence. But in the past decade the congregation has become so vital that it is one of the ten fastest-growing Unitarian Universalist congregations. In 1990, it had 100 members. Today it has 409.

Reasons for its vitality include the following:

- A conscious decision by the congregation to grow, followed by
- Calling a minister who is now in his 14th year;
- Innovative religious education programs for children and adults led by a longtime director of religious education;
- A welcoming atmosphere;
- Worship that is participatory;
- And the fact that there are no other inclusive liberal religious communities in the area.

Appleton is part of a metro area of 200,000 at the northern end of Lake Winnebago and about 100 miles northwest of Milwaukee. The region, whose population grew 15 percent between 1990 and 2000, is a financial and papermaking center and is socially and politically conservative, says the Fox Valley minister, the Rev. Roger Bertschausen. It's a great place to be a Unitarian Universalist," says Bertschausen. "In this area we're unique and different, and we know what we stand for."

The fellowship, organized in 1957, evolved into a small discussion club in the years that followed. The lay-led group reached a point in the 1970s when 10 or fewer attended services. There were so few children that they were taken to a local United Church of Christ church for religious education. Then a few people came with experience in other Unitarian Universalist congregations, and the culture began to change.

After years of renting, the fellowship bought its first building in 1981. An extension minister was appointed in 1985, followed by the decision to grow and, in 1990, to call Bertschausen, who was graduating from the University of Chicago Divinity School. Together he and the congregation made changes. Deciding the services were too casual, he says, they redesigned them to speak both to the heart and the head. When the congregation hired Ann Barker in 1995 to be director of religious education, that program was revamped as well.

Deb Andrews was board president when the congregation first began to grow in the 1980s. "One of the things we asked ourselves was, 'Don't we have an obligation to the people who haven't yet found us?'" she said. "And then, the bigger we got, the more things we found we could do, and then we didn't want to do without them—adult education, a choir, small groups." She says that growth changed the congregation's dynamics. "When we were small we all knew we had to play a significant role to keep it going. As we got bigger, people became more distanced from that sense of ownership. We've had to work to keep people connected. We try to do that with small groups and personal contact."

—From InterConnections, September 16, 2004. To see the article, go to UUA.org and click Leaders then Leaders' Library, then search for "Fox Valley Vitality."

### Becoming Clear on Hospitality

It is clear that those congregations that are intentionally welcoming to visitors will grow numerically. It is also clear that at best, congregations that make only a token effort will only replace lost members. In addition, it is clear that Unitarian Universalist congregations generally have the opportunity to welcome many more members.

Sometimes we Unitarian Universalists are our own enemies in offering hospitality. We say, "Unitarian Universalists don't evangelize." We utter elitist phrases such as, "All potential Unitarian Universalists are smart enough to find us if they want to be with us." This sort of thinking can become epidemic in a congregation and prevent a truly welcoming attitude from being established. Only when our movement takes seriously

the call to offer “radical hospitality” to the newcomer—to offer clear information and the opportunity for connection—will we be able to claim healthy growth.

Saint Benedict developed the art of radical hospitality. It has various aspects, but the main idea is to offer visitors your attention and the grace that you can give when they visit you. It does not mean that you lose yourself in being ingratiating, nor that you stop all your work for the day as if the visitors were royalty. It simply means that you pause and recognize the visitors as being worthy, and from this stance give what you can.

## **Twelve Essential Steps of Welcoming for Growth**

### **1. Spruce Up the Front Door**

No one joins a church he or she has not visited. If individuals cannot find information about you (in advertisements, your Web site, or the telephone directory) or locate your congregation (through physical signage that plainly marks parking and entry), they will not feel welcome. Make sure the front page of your Web site offers a welcome, has your address and telephone number, and offers plainly accessible directions (from all points on the compass) and maps. Show photos of the main road signs (so they are easy to spot on the drive in) and the main entry.

### **2. Invite People You Know**

Researchers have found an amazing statistic about who will come to your congregation. They have learned that when friends or acquaintances ask a person to come with them to a service, about 90 percent of persons without a church home will do so then or sometime in the future. Yes, that is nine out of ten persons. Therefore, based on the research cited in the chart on page 11, if each member invited three persons a year to a congregation with a good membership program, one of the three would become a member.

### **3. Send "Welcome" Signals**

Many newcomers have never belonged to any church community before. Do not presume they know what to do or where to go. All parking areas should have arrows pointing to the main entrance for services. Ideally, the best parking spaces (other than handicapped-authorized spots) would be reserved for visitors. Greeters should be in place and ready to say hello to everyone, paying particular attention to those they do not recognize. Greeters should offer orders of service and explain that "this paper tells you about today's service." They also should invite newcomers to stay for coffee and conversation.

### **4. See As a Visitor Does**

The appearance of your church home reflects the value the religious community places on its members. Dusty corners, drab or peeling paint, broken fixtures, and cluttered corners say, "What happens here must not be very important." Today's church seeker

feels most at home in a church that is most like where he or she works and receives other services. Select a task force of self-identified "neat freaks" to identify problem areas, plan better out-of-sight storage, and select spots for paint and repair. Make an annual date when all members stay after service to clean and repair. Have a party at the end. Above all, make sure the entrance to church facilities sends a message of warmth, cleanliness, and taking church seriously. For more information on carrying out a facilities audit, go to [UUA.org](#) and go to the Leaders' Library, then search "Facilities Audit."\*

## **5. Speak the Language of Newcomers**

Services are often filled (cluttered) with announcements, requests for volunteers, and inside jokes where only first names are used and everyone is expected to know acronyms: "BJ, our DRE wants to ask all those in OWL to arrive early for our Con trip to AGM." What visitor can make sense of that? Indeed, a visiting Unitarian Universalist from another congregation may not be able to break the code. Screen all announcements with an awareness of visitor comfort and understanding.

## **6. Make Every Member a Host**

After newcomers pass the initial greeter, they are at the mercy of the congregation. Whether or not members see themselves as responsible for continuing the practice of hospitality is what determines most whether a visitor will return. Members should introduce themselves to their new neighbors before the service. Then they should invite and offer to escort any newcomers to coffee and make at least one introduction of an existing member to the newcomers. High-functioning congregations will include "getting to know you" moments early in the service, and if personal introductions and welcomes are given, the nearest member might do the introduction! In the Boise, Idaho, congregation, each willing visitor (every member of the family) is introduced by name by a member of the congregation and then invited to coffee by that member. That's real hospitality.

## **7. Follow the Rule of the Two Tens**

Research has shown that the first and second most important times in determining whether a visitor will return are, respectively, the ten minutes just after the service and the ten minutes just before the service. It is at these times that most visitors expect welcomes, introductions, conversation, and graciousness. Visitors who are not invited into conversation with members are unlikely to return.

## **8. Ask Visitors to Come Again**

Visitors report that the single act of a member inviting them to return is a powerful incentive—but there is one caveat. If the visitor returns and the person who invited them is present but does not say hello, it causes disillusionment in the visitor. The visitor quite rightly concludes that the person extending the invitation did not mean it sincerely. So in asking visitors to return, members must make notes and do what it takes to recognize returnees. A simple "How nice to see you again" will make the

difference. Another very welcoming option is to invite a newcomer (someone who has visited more than once) to a church event as your guest. You could even pick the visitor up and bring him or her to church with you.

## **9. Follow Up**

Following up with visitors should be standard practice in all congregations. Typically, you will need to send a note within forty-eight hours. This practice coincides with research findings that most visitors will plan whether or not to attend a church on Wednesday. Most congregations send these notes only after a first visit, but newcomers may appreciate a different type of note or card after second visits as well. The initial notes should not come from the minister, but from a layperson. In general, visitors feel that notes from laypersons are more genuine! Beyond receiving a note, visitors most likely to return will positively regard a call from a member on Wednesday or Thursday; someone the visitor met is best.

## **10. Involve New Members**

Doing a good job of welcoming people in the front door is meaningless if they drift out the back door. Members need help belonging, finding ways to get involved, and meeting other members. In all programs, new members should have reserved spots and be recruited to participate. Small group ministry (covenant groups), classes, discussion groups, circle suppers, picnics, committees, and boards should all have opportunities for new members where both the input of "fresh eyes" and the opportunity to meet the congregation intersect. This involvement incorporates the new members into the life of the congregation, providing support in the transition that is part of moving into membership. Congregations that understand that transition and continue their intentional welcoming beyond the moment of "signing the book" will find that their members stay with them and become involved at much greater rates than congregations without a membership plan.

## **11. Maintain Outreach**

Outreach is communication with the larger community outside the congregation. Outreach is all the programs, communications, invitations, witnesses, and ministry where persons who are not from the congregation encounter your church. Many of the speakers, classes, fundraisers, and services to community should be open to the public. The congregation should cultivate a public presence and be known to stand for liberal religious values. When members of the larger community think of your congregation, will they

- Know anything about it?
- Have regard for your service to the community?
- Have regard for your hospitable ways?

## **12. Each One Teach One**

Share what you learn to do well. Conduct workshops in the district. Mentor smaller congregations. Offer General Assembly workshops and submissions to

InterConnections, the Unitarian Universalist lay leaders' newsletter. Spread the word, and offer your congregation as a resource to others who are eager to establish themselves as radically hospitable and welcoming to newcomers.

For more information on the path of membership, please see The Membership Journey, at [UUA.org](http://UUA.org) by going to the Leaders' Library and by searching "Membership Journey."\*

### **How Many Visitors Do You Have?**

Church consultant Pat Keifert, in "The Welcoming Congregation," Net Results, May 1996, reveals some amazing study results. "Every year for more than a decade my research associates and I have run a very simple test in thirteen different congregations around the country. We send in twelve visitors who are not known to each particular congregation. We ask the congregations to identify the visitors, that is, to tell who their visitors were. We have found that in no instance since we started this exercise has any congregation been able to identify more than six of the twelve."

### **On Counting Membership**

That numbers count is a reality of contemporary Unitarian Universalism. It is impossible to discuss membership without addressing ways in which numbers are used: to measure growth and decline, both in the UUA and in individual congregations; to measure trends in various regions of the continent; to determine levels and types of services from the UUA; to establish Fair Share payments to districts and the UUA; to provide congregational statistics for reporting in the UUA and district directories and to outside publications. In addition, membership numbers are shared, contrasted, and compared by ministerial colleagues when discussing the vitality of their congregations, and they are a major descriptive feature of congregations, used, for example, in the ministerial search process when a congregation describes itself to potential ministers, both settled and interim.

—Belonging: The Meaning of Membership (Boston: Commission on Appraisal, Unitarian Universalist Association, 2001), page 40.

### **Growth Is Natural and Shows the Welcoming Aspect of Our Identity**

Sometimes a congregation imagines that it has reached the "perfect size" and should effectively stop welcoming newcomers. Those who think this way believe that "if we grow, we will lose the great feeling of community we have achieved." The truth is that such an attitude is both counterproductive and contrary to our Unitarian Universalist history and values.

Artificially trying to control numerical growth is not sustainable. In areas of general population growth, both individuals seeking churches and Unitarian Universalists moving into the area will arrive at the door. Congregations trying to limit their growth will have to turn people away and refuse people membership. A congregation may become so insular and so unwelcoming that few people want to become affiliated with it. Because most Unitarian Universalists acknowledge our connection to the larger world, an attitude of exclusiveness will either drive away existing members or doom the congregation to extinction. A congregation can pour immense amounts of energy into trying to maintain a certain size. The congregation then loses that energy to its larger mission. If growth looms as a terrible fear within a congregation, it is far more productive to channel energy into community-building activities within the congregation or into founding new congregations than to attempt to control the numbers.

It is also important to understand that from the earliest days of our Unitarian Universalist roots, we have welcomed those who sought us out. Our faith has been a refuge to those on the margins of state-imposed religion, those who were labeled heretics, and those who sought to spread a loving vision of human nature in contrast to one of sin and worthlessness. If our history teaches us anything in our present incarnation, it is that we must actively welcome all people of good will. Unitarian Universalism must create and sustain systems that resist elitism and instead apply the power of our legacy to welcome all who seek the support and values of our movement.

Concern about change is normal. It is especially reasonable when what is known is thought to be "good" and what is to be changed is unclear. Not many want to trade a sure thing for an unknown quantity. Yet change is the only thing that is lasting. All the insights of faith, theology, and community that our Unitarian Universalist forebears experienced were once unknown quantities appearing as threats to the status quo. Nothing should be as usual as change in religious community, because with change comes new insights and practices that make our faith meaningful today.

### **Growth: Issues of Elitism, Classism, and Power**

When congregations say they choose not to grow, that they like things as they are, and that they do not wish to be hassled by the challenges that growing would require, they may not fully recognize how this choice affects others. The very thought that we have a right to control, exclude, or marginalize the needs of those seeking Unitarian Universalist congregations conveys a use of "power over" decision making. In so doing, we build invisible walls that only persons of privilege are likely to transcend. For more information on dismantling oppression, please refer to the JUUST Change consultancy program, at [UUA.org](http://UUA.org) by going to the Leaders' Library and by searching "JUUST change"\*

Persons of color, those who are physically challenged, those of low income, and those whose value in society is demeaned (for example, immigrants, non-English speakers, or

single-parent families) will experience these barriers as signs of their unwelcome status and as further rejection of the value of their place in society. They are likely to see the indifference as systemic to Unitarian Universalism.

Congregations may claim that unwelcoming attitudes are not directed to any group in particular and may deny that anyone should perceive it otherwise. This is naive. Evidence shows that individuals who will succeed in transcending the invisible walls will largely be white, empowered individuals who are familiar with the systems and nuances of privilege. Those who remain outside will be the individuals least like the present demographics of the congregation.

When a congregation claims the tradition of Unitarian Universalism to be its own, it lays claim to a heritage of welcoming the heretic, the seeker, and individuals coming from more traditional understandings of religious community. We cannot say we are Unitarian Universalists through welcoming gays and lesbians but not transgender persons, or welcoming the well educated but not the seeker with a GED (an adult-earned high school diploma). Our legacy demands that we ask ourselves who is served and who is harmed when, for our own convenience, we erect invisible walls, establish privilege as the norm, and save ourselves from having to encounter change.

For insight into how we build invisible walls and barriers, read *Bridging the Class Divide*, by Linda Stout (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

### **Growing Age Diversity**

"In a truly intergenerational community, people of all ages are valued and respected for what they have to bring, and each person is given the opportunity to interact with and learn from people at different points in their lives. At its best, young adult ministry is one piece of this puzzle. Those who minister to and with young adults should seek, ultimately, to create communities that value young adults and the young adult experience in our society. These communities would welcome young adults, recognize their gifts and talents, uphold their experience, and offer opportunities for personal and faith development in the caring embrace of a congregation."

—Michael Tino, Director, Campus Ministry and Young Adult Services, Unitarian Universalist Association

Sometimes we Unitarian Universalists squirm at the mention of faith, at the need to have faith, live in faith, and move forward in faith. "Have faith in what?" we may ask. "We do not have a common theology, so how can we have anything called faith?" Some of us are theists and do have a faith in God; some of us do not share this belief. Nevertheless, the truth is that we can and should have faith in one another—in the

purpose and power of shared community to witness and transform lives. We can have faith in our fellow Unitarian Universalists. In their respective congregations and in our common association, Unitarian Universalists seek to uphold the liberal religious idea that we humans bear responsibility for our actions. As a movement, we make the claim that together, we are capable of great accomplishments when we act in hope and compassion. Together, we Unitarian Universalists can have faith that tomorrow will see the dawn of new opportunity to live out ethical values by peaceful means.

When we live out of these understandings of faith, the challenges of growth seem to be exactly the right work for our congregations. Growing in members, wisdom, strength, and action are the bedrock tasks of religious community. Rather than fearing or avoiding them, we ought to delight in their challenges and bring our best efforts to their service.

### **Change and "Stuffing the Chicken"**

A small congregation that had struggled to survive without a building, staff, or minister learned from one congregant a lesson in how to handle change. This fellowship had a unique collection basket. Someone had contributed a basket that was partially covered with a fabric "chicken." The chicken was really a cover meant to keep rolls and biscuits warm, but the congregation had co-opted it in a promotion to increase giving at services.

Struggles with a lack of money and basic budgets had caused leaders to seek a catchy encouragement for giving. They announced to all at the service that the offering goal was to "stuff the chicken" as fully as possible and provide for the modest needs of the congregation. To the delight of the congregation, stuffing the chicken drew an enthusiastic response, and plate offerings dramatically increased . . . for awhile.

Eventually, enthusiasm waned, offering amounts leveled out, and people tired of the once fun notion of "stuffing." Visitors arriving at the congregation found the unexplained chicken strange, and leaders decided to retire the chicken for a more traditional offering basket.

Several members, still feeling strongly about the need to stimulate giving, objected strenuously to the loss of the chicken. For them, it was symbolic of desired success and a funny joke that community members shared. A not-small disagreement ensued, and for some weeks, the retirement of the chicken was the subject of very animated conversation at the coffee hour. The chicken did not return, however, and the resentment of prochicken members lay fallow beneath the surface of congregational life.

Years later, during a review of a church year in which change was occurring at a rapid and challenging pace, an elder of the congregation rose to speak. She recalled for the

congregation the Great Chicken Controversy and explained that she had been one of those who resisted the retirement of the chicken. The congregation, and especially its newcomers, were amused by this well-told tale and were fondly poised to listen when she shared her great learning from that experience:

I see now that the wonderful things we have here today in this congregation happen because each of us are learning to let go of our individual preferences and let go of the things that are personal attachments. The chicken was right for another time, and not right for the next. The congregation is best served when we trust that the future asks different things of us and that we must be willing to trust the wisdom of the group to meet that future. I loved the chicken idea, but I love more what has happened among us, and sometimes you have to give up your chicken to grow as part of a community.

It is not surprising that "giving up your chicken" is now part of the lexicon of that congregation, shorthand for seeking the common good over individual preference and a mantra for the necessity of embracing the future. Your congregation will undoubtedly create your own saying that captures you at your best in facing challenges and gifts.

## References

Loren B. Mead's quotations on maturational growth and organic growth can be found in More Than Numbers: The Ways Churches Grow, (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1993), pages 43 and 60, respectively.

Robert Hill's rate of one new member per year for the average congregation is from The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry: Saving the World Ten at a Time (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2003).

The growth rate of approximately 0.6 percent per year is from Unitarian Universalist Association Growth Report, 4-10-05, Harlan Limpert, Director, Office of District Services, Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston, MA.

**\*Important note for searching UUA.org:** All UUA resources mentioned are available in the Leaders section of the web site, in the Leaders' Library. Please use quotes around the title when you search to bring up the resource or item you seek.