

Title: Realistic Hope and Hopeful Realism

Blurb: According to recent surveys of religion in America, a continued decline of church membership in future decades seems inevitable. What does that mean for those of us who enjoy the important social benefits that belonging to a religious community provides? How do we manage the tension between hope and realism when it comes to the future of our faith? Let us explore what we, as Unitarian Universalists, can do for religion today...and tomorrow.

Speaker: Rev. Phillip Lund

Bio: Phillip Lund has over twenty-five years of experience serving congregations in the areas of faith formation and spiritual growth, first as a religious educator in Bloomington, Indiana, New York City, and Chicago, Illinois, and most recently as a congregational life consultant working for the MidAmerica Region of the Unitarian Universalist Association. He holds a Master of Divinity degree from Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago and a certificate in InterSpiritual Counseling from One Spirit Learning Alliance in New York. He lives in Saint Paul, Minnesota, with his wife, Julia, and their son, Henry David.

Video: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1O3tBMYi-8fcneNzpwXVf7Q8dmh0O5hF/view?usp=sharing>

Opening Words: A Place of Belonging and Caring, by Kimberlee Anne Tomczak Carlson

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/opening/place-belonging-and-caring>

Reading: Community Means Strength, by Starhawk*

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/community-means-strength>

Closing Words: May You Be Filled, by Eric Williams

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/closing/294188.shtml>

or

You Are Not Alone, by Rev Wayne B. Arnason

Take courage friends.

The way is often hard, the path is never clear, And the stakes are very high.

Take courage.

For deep down, there is another truth:

You are not alone.

Hymns: Singing the Living Tradition

Spirit of Life #123

We Laugh, We Cry #354
From You I Receive #402

Singing the Journey
When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place #1008
Building a New Way #1017
Woyaya #1020

Worship Web: What We Need Is Here, by Amy McCreath
<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/music/what-we-need-here>

There Is a Love, by Elizabeth H. Norton & Rebecca Parker
<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/music/there-love>

In These Hard Times, by Linda Hirschhorn
<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/music/these-hard-times>

* I read Starhawk's Community Means Strength in the body of the sermon. If you want to use it as a separate reading, it's worth repeating!

Realistic Hope & Hopeful Realism

As the staff person for the MidAmerica Region of the UUA who works primarily with small congregations, I've had the opportunity to observe just how much things have changed in our religious communities since the pandemic began in early 2020, when in-person Sunday services were canceled and buildings were closed as it became clear how serious the pandemic was (and continues to be). And even though most congregations were able to quickly pivot to gathering online, it wasn't (and still isn't) quite the same. Doing "church" has changed dramatically since the pandemic struck. But the need for change wasn't necessary caused by the pandemic; the general attitude toward religion in America was already in the midst of a marked transformation, a transformation that has only been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Almost fifteen years ago, Holly Anne Lux Sullivan (a UU minister who is currently a bereavement counselor in North Carolina), delivered a sermon that exemplifies how the attitude toward religion has changed in the United States.

In a Barnes & Noble just before Easter, [she writes] I watched a woman glance at a table of books and make a face like she'd just tasted something awful. Then

she hurried on by as if she were afraid the books would bite. Curious, I looked to see what she had grimaced at: All the books on the table were about religion, primarily Christianity. They had titles like "Misquoting Jesus" and "What Jesus Really Meant."

All I could think was, "Is this what we've done to God? Is that we've done to religion? Is American religion today in such a sad state that when someone sees a table full of religion books in a bookstore, she scurries away and looks like she's going to be sick?"

The answer is yes [says Lux Sullivan]: This is what we've done to religion.

And the truth is, something has happened with religion over the last few decades. Fewer and fewer people are members of religious organizations, and more and more people are identifying as "spiritual, but not religious" or "nones." In fact, there were a few of polls and surveys released last year that make clear just how profound these changes have been. Consider this headline from an article on Gallup's website: "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time," and the story highlights:

- In 2020, 47% of U.S. adults belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque
- Down more than 20 points from turn of the century
- Change primarily due to rise in Americans with no religious preference

Even though I've been aware of this decline since I was in seminary over twenty years ago, I was still shocked to see it. And when I say that, I'm not exaggerating. I was shocked. This graph from the Gallup article shows just how dramatic the downturn is.

According to the article,

Americans' membership in houses of worship continued to decline last year, dropping below 50% for the first time in Gallup's eight-decade trend. In 2020, 47% of Americans said they belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque, down from 50% in 2018 and 70% in 1999.

U.S. church membership was 73% when Gallup first measured it in 1937 and remained near 70% for the next six decades, before beginning a steady decline around the turn of the 21st century.

This milestone of church membership falling below 50% of Americans is truly alarming. And it's especially alarming for small congregations. And frankly, it leaves me a little disheartened. I truly believe being part of a religious community (be it a church, synagogue, or mosque) has real benefits: spiritual, emotional—even physical.

Along with a decline in membership, there's been a drop in worship attendance, too. The latest Faith Communities Today survey reports that there has been a decline in median worship attendance among US Congregations since 2000, the year they started tracking trends in the U.S. religious landscape. Twenty years ago, the median worship attendance was 137. In 2020, that number was 65—a fifty percent drop in attendance. This fall-off is consistent among all congregations: it doesn't matter if their membership is growing, plateaued, or declining.

So, what are we supposed to do with this news? In her sermon, “What We Can Do for Religion Today,” Holly Anne Lux Sullivan offers this suggestion: “Being hopefully realistic in the face of adversity is...what we can do for religion today.” It's a great idea, but to be honest, being hopefully realistic at this point in the twenty-first century can be difficult.

There are so many heartbreaking things happening right now: more and more of the Antarctic ice shelf falling into the ocean, over 800,000 Americans dying of COVID, the foundations of democratic society being threatened at home and around the world, the refusal by so many of our fellow citizens to confront the racial and economic injustices of our society.

Still, I think there is some hope to be found. But to get there, we need to *start* with being realistic. We need to go a little deeper into what this decline in church membership means for us as Unitarian Universalists, especially those of us whose primary experience of Unitarian Universalism is in small congregations. To do that, I'd like to take a look at another survey that came out last year, this time from the Public Religion Research Institute.

What I like about PRRI's 2020 Census of American Religion, which was published last July, is that it actually includes Unitarian Universalists (just barely). If you look at this chart from their census, you'll see that Unitarian Universalists are the last religious group they mention by name, right before "Other Religion" (which is where most other surveys of religion put UUs). And you'll note that folks who identify as Unitarian Universalists are an incredibly small percentage of Americans: .2% of the population,

smaller than the percentage of those who identify as Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, and Jehovah's Witness, and certainly smaller than those who identify as Protestant or Catholic.

We are, and always have been, a very small religious group in the United States (and around the world). And that, I believe, is the first reality we need to face. With fewer and fewer people identifying with any religion, and with increasingly smaller numbers of those who do identify with a religion actually attending a church, synagogue, or mosque, the potential for small congregations to attract new people decreases.

The PRRI census mentions another reality that I think we must face: Unitarian Universalists are one of the oldest groups in terms of median age. The median age for all Americans is 47; for White evangelical protestants, it's 56; for White catholics it's 54; and for Unitarian Universalists, it's 53. By contrast, the median age of those who identify as "Unaffiliated" is 38; 36 for Buddhists and Hindus; and 33 for Muslims. The reality is that we are, collectively, older, and have been that way for sometime.

Here's the third reality I believe we need to face up to: Unitarian Universalist are, along with Hindu and Jewish Americans, most likely to have college degrees. Fifty-three

percent of Unitarian Universalists have four-year college degrees or higher, compared to 36 percent of the U.S. population aged 25 and older. Thirty-six percent is, by the way, the same percentage of the religiously unaffiliated who have a four-year college degree or higher.

That's the reality, then. We are a very small group in terms of the percentage of Americans who identify as Unitarian Universalist: .2%. We are also an older group in terms of our median age: 53—15 years older than the median age of the “Unaffiliated.” And in terms of educational attainment, we have more in common with Hindu and Jewish Americans than we have with Americans who identify with other religious groups.

There's one more reality check I'd like to offer, and it comes directly from our UUA, specifically the membership statistics from 1961 (when the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America merged) to 2020. In 1961 there were 1,035 congregations with 151,557 adult members and 77,546 “RE Enrollments.” In 2020 there were 1027 congregations with 152,921 adult members. Not bad, eh? Only seven fewer congregations and 1364 *more* adult members! But here's the reality: in 2020, there were only 34,768 “RE Enrollments.” That means when we look at the

combined adult membership and RE enrollments, we've gone from 229,103 in 1961 to 187,689 in 2020, a decline of 41,414.

Back in 2005, Larry Ladd, the UUA Financial Advisor, said this in his report to General Assembly: "For four years in a row I have written in this report that the declines in religious education enrollments should be 'a warning signal for our movement.'" And indeed, less than five years after Ladd shared his warning, the adult membership in the UUA began to decline after years of small but steady growth. And it continues to decline to this day.

So here's the reality: Unitarian Universalism in America is a small group of older, educated adults that is declining in numbers. And that was *before* the COVID-19 pandemic struck.

At this point in the sermon, I wish I could get to the hope. But we need to acknowledge that the pandemic has exacerbated the impact of these realities. Here's what a recent article in the Wall Street Journal had to say about the situation:

The number of churchgoers has steadily dropped in the U.S. over the past few decades. But COVID-19 and its lockdown restrictions accelerated that fall. In-person church attendance is roughly 30% to 50% lower than it was before the pandemic.

While religious leaders expect some rebound once the pandemic recedes, many don't expect attendance to return to previous levels.

And as Rob Dyer, lead consultant for Ministry Architects, said in a blog post last September:

As our society is opening up more and more, people are starting to pick up the weight of busy lives again. With the pandemic and virus variants over their heads, people are finding that they have a reduced capacity for weight bearing. Even joyful activities are getting sidelined in this "new normal." Now, the church is realizing something not just about young adults, but also about people of all ages in our churches. They're not coming back.

The super volunteers who used to carry twenty positions in the church are now looking to do just a few things.

Our regular attenders are becoming semi-regular.

Our fringe folks are fading away.

Church consultant Carey Nieuwhof is even more explicit: “The Great Return to church has become the Great Realization: Maybe they’re not coming back. Not now, not tomorrow, not ever.”

So enough of the reality, already! Where’s the hope? It may sound simplistic (maybe even corny), but when I think about the hope for Unitarian Universalism, I think about the 1000 plus UU congregations around the country, and—more importantly—the people who keep those congregations going. In other words, I’m thinking about you, each of you, the ones who are still here after all the hardships and heartbreaks of the last two years.

But what does it mean to still be here as we enter the third year of the COVID-19 pandemic? Consider this distinction from Carey Nieuwhof:

Pre-COVID in growing, plateaued, and declining churches, you could break down people who were part of your church into two primary categories:

- Members and Attenders
- Engagers

Think of members and attenders as just that: people who joined your church and/or people who attended but rarely moved beyond that.

Think of engagers on the other hand as, well, members and attenders who engaged in a way far beyond church attendance.

Before the pandemic, it was possible for most congregations to survive with this sort of division between members/attenders on one hand and engagers on the other. But the current reality is different. As Rob Dyer said,

Super volunteers...are now looking to do just a few things.

Regular attenders are becoming semi-regular.

And fringe folks are fading away.

The Gallup poll report put it this way:

Churches are only as strong as their membership and are dependent on their members for financial support and service to keep operating. Because it is unlikely that people who do not have a religious preference will become church members, the challenge for church leaders is to encourage those who do affiliate with a specific faith to become formal, and active, church members.

This is pretty much what Carey Nieuwhof suggests when he says, “Turn your remaining attendees into engagers.” And like most of the things I’ve been talking about today, this is not an idea that’s new with the pandemic. The need for attenders to be more fully engaged with their congregations has been around before COVID-19.

Here’s another story from a minister that occurred around Easter time. It’s from the “Irreverin” blog by Erin Wathen on the website *Patheos*:

I was writing my weekly note to the congregation (a few days late, because I took Monday off and it’s all downhill from there). Usually in this note, I share a few words about the message for Sunday so that we can all be reflecting on the

same topic throughout the week. It makes the sermon more of an ongoing conversation. I sometimes discuss something that's going on in the life of the church, as well. But this week, it was more of a thank you note. Because when I think about how much work my church folks did over the last few weeks to get our place ready for Easter, it blows my mind. And as I look around the property, I can see the fruits of many hours of shared labor.

Sparkling windows and floors; finely manicured landscaping; dramatic paraments, hung with a complex pulley system by dedicated House Elves in the wee hours... And then I start thinking about the work of the worship team, the children's ministry team and musicians; not to mention greeters, hand-shakers, bulletin-hander-outers, and coffee makers; and the youth group out there hiding eggs for the little ones; plus more behind-the-scenes workers I have not mentioned. Just thinking about it makes me overwhelmed with gratitude. It's enough to make my mascara run. (I'm not crying, you are).

In writing this note to my people, I wrote that it takes a whole village of volunteers to make all of this happen.... But then I found myself hitting the

backspace button. Because “volunteer” is not quite the right word for what our people do at church.

I know I’m not the only one who cringes when someone sees me, without kids in tow, and asks if my husband is “babysitting.” Well, no. I mean, yes, he is at home with the kids tonight. But I do not think you can effectively say “babysitting” when it is your own dang kid. I’d say we could just call that parenting.

I feel the same when people talk about “volunteering” at church. And yes, I know it’s just a word. But it’s the wrong word, for a lot of reasons.

To volunteer means that you are an outside resource, stepping in to help an organization in need. Volunteering is what we do when we pick up trash at the park, or build a house with Habitat, or help sort food at the local food pantry.

Volunteering is what I do at my kids’ school on Fridays.

In other words, it’s what you do at a place that is important to you—but not at a place that belongs to you.

And I guess that is the important distinction for me... You cannot volunteer at your own church, in the same way you cannot babysit your own kid. Because the church belongs to you in the same way your family does. It's your own place, your own people. So of course you help take care of it. Of course you do yard work and make coffee and teach the kids and sing in the choir and whatever all else it is you do for the home and the people that you love.

“It's your own place, your own people. So of course you help take care of it.” This was true 2017 when Erin Wathen wrote those words, and it's ten, twenty, a hundred times truer in 2022. The hope for our congregations lies in all of us doing what needs to be done to make sure our spiritual homes are here for the people that we love.

And in doing so, we're making sure that our congregations are here for the people in our communities who are still seeking a spiritual home, people who share our common values of

Believing in the worthiness of every person.

Showing compassion and fairness.

Accepting others for who they are.

Growing through a personal search for truth.

Leading with democratic spirit.

Working for justice.

Understanding that everything is interconnected,

And building a diverse, multicultural Beloved Community.

If our congregations have any hope of surviving, this is it. Even the Wall Street Journal acknowledges that “a tighter congregation of devoted members will be stronger in the long run.” Now is the time to heed the advice of Carey Nieuwhof, who asks us to “focus on the people who stayed, not the people who left, and embrace our new church.”

To close, I offer this reading from Starhawk called “Community Means Strength.” It sums up perfectly why it’s so important for each of us to embrace our congregations and do “what needs to be done to make sure our spiritual homes are here for the people that we love”:

We are all longing to go home to some place
we have never been—a place half-remembered and half-envisioned
we can only catch glimpses of from time to time.

Community.

Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion
without having the words catch in our throats.

Somewhere a circle of hands
will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter,
voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power.

Community means strength
that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done.

Arms to hold us when we falter.

A circle of healing.

A circle of friends.

Someplace where we can be free.

May your congregation be such a place.