



Congregations and Beyond

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Introduction

I am a parish minister at heart. I loved serving my former congregation. I still miss the richness and depth of congregational life. It was my passion for growing the membership of our congregations that led to my involvement in denominational work. At their best, congregations are deeply engaging and serve essential spiritual, emotional and relational needs. Congregations can be wonderful springboards for acting in unison. Congregations will always be at the center of Unitarian Universalism.

And, I am realizing in a profound way that congregations cannot be the only way we connect with people. We have always seen ourselves as a faith, as part of an international religious movement. The Board's bylaw proposal that we expand the definition of a congregation is the result of more than a decade of discussion that recognizes that the nature of congregations and religious life is changing.

I have observed a number of things that speak to me of the truly historic opportunities and challenges that are now before us. Here is a partial list:

- We have known for many years that the number of people who identify as UUs is about four times the membership of our congregations (about 160,000 adult members and about 650,000 people who identify as UUs). In other words, for every adult member there are three non-members who say they are Unitarian Universalist.
- The second largest gathering of UUs, after General Assembly, is the Southeast UU Summer Institute (SUUSI). A significant number of people who attend SUUSI year after year do not belong to any UU congregation. There are other UU camps and conferences that draw similarly large numbers of unaffiliated people.
- The majority of children raised as UUs do not join UU congregations when they are young adults. However, they continue to identify as UUs and share core UU values. Often they have close friendships with fellow young adults they met at church or at "youth cons."
- Some of our committed and generous donors do not belong to congregations. I recently met with a donor who gave us \$300,000 and yet has never been a member of a congregation. A few weeks ago I spoke with another non-UU who has donated hundreds of thousands of dollars.

- An increasing percentage of seminarians choose a community ministry rather than parish ministry. They see themselves as having a vocation for ministry, but not for parish ministry. Our ministry extends to prisons, hospitals, the military and organizations that seek to build a more compassionate and just world.
- Initiatives like Standing on the Side of Love are founded on the realization that many non-UUs share our values of justice, equity and compassion.
- Our growth in terms of members of congregations has been stagnant, despite a number of ambitious growth efforts.
- Demographic research shows that people are less likely to attend traditional worship services *of any denomination*, even if they consider themselves religious.
- The Church of the Larger Fellowship (CLF), our one non-traditional congregation, has recently greatly enhanced its outreach, providing online worship services and new online services. It provides an excellent model for new ways of connecting and we are committed to working collaboratively with CLF as we move toward thinking of Unitarian Universalism in new ways.

I am also convinced that our movement has enormous potential to involve more people and have a greater impact. That conviction is based on a number of facts. Chief among them are:

- We have scores of examples of thriving and growing congregations of varying sizes, in all parts of the country and in different kinds of settings. Vital UU congregations fill a basic human need and attract people.
- The great cultural shift in America (and in the world, for that matter) is on our side. One indication is the rapidly growing number of people with no religious affiliation. Attitudes of younger people on such issues as marriage equality, environmental justice and immigration are further examples. Consider how many of the values of the “Occupy” movement align with ours.
- The internet has created opportunities for scattered pockets of UUs and individual UUs in the US and around the world to forge a connection with us.

What follows is an exploration of a strategic direction for Unitarian Universalism that may seem a radical departure from our past, but which I believe is a natural development consistent with our core values and reflective of our historic emphasis upon being willing to push beyond pre-determined boundaries.

Unitarian Universalism as a religious movement

We have long defined ourselves as an association of congregations. *We need to think of ourselves as a religious movement.* The difference is potentially huge.

Congregations as local parishes arose in a different era. They arose in a time of limited mobility and communication. Most members lived within a couple of miles of their church. When Unitarianism and Universalism were in their infancy, no one would think

of belonging to a congregation ten miles away. Churches were the centers of community life in a largely agricultural society. (When Channing, Parker and Emerson were in the pulpit, Boston had a population of about 30,000, slightly more than Beacon Hill today.) To be limited to a traditional parish form of organization in the 21st century is like limiting ourselves to technology that does not require electricity.

The implications of thinking of ourselves as a religious movement rather than only a collection of congregations are profound and liberating. Here is an initial list:

- We focus more on connection and less on “membership.” Paying attention to who our ministry serves, how many lives we change and the difference we are making in the world can help us redirect our efforts outward.
- We invite people to connect to our UU movement *whether or not they choose to join a congregation*. We can reach out to young adults, students, snow birds, people living in foreign countries, linguistic and ethnic minorities, etc. They can all be part of the UU movement.
- We find ways to invite the 500,000 or so people who say they are UUs but are not members of a congregation into our movement.
- We have a way of inspiring people who share our values, want to be part of our movement, but are not ready to join a congregation.
- We have a natural way to engage with groups that were once affiliates—groups like UUs for a Just Economic Community (UUJEC), Latino(a) UU Networking Association (LUUNA), Diverse & Revolutionary UU Multicultural Ministries (DRUUMM), seminarians, etc.
- We continue our efforts to connect with UU college students. We would make clear that they are still a part of our movement.
- We have a good way of taking in people through such portals as Standing on the Side of Love.

What we need

- A new kind of “open source” way for many kinds of people to interact with and inform Unitarian Universalism.
- Uses of social media that are rich and flexible. Technology is critical to connecting people today.
- A great deal more research about those who identify as UUs but are not members of a congregation.
- Face to face opportunities for small groups, etc. These can be held anywhere—homes, coffee shops, university residence halls—not just in church buildings. Think “Meet Up” opportunities for UUs.
- An ability to engage with Unitarian Universalism at a variety of levels of commitment.

- Social justice witness, activism and volunteerism opportunities.
- Scalability. This means an ability to accommodate individuals, small interest groups, local and regional groups, and larger national groups.

A two part strategy

1. Congregations remain the base

Creating ways of engaging people who are not members of our congregations is not a threat to congregations. Quite the opposite is true. We can help lower the walls between our congregations and the larger world. This can help make our congregations stronger.

The UUA would continue to do all the important things we do now to support congregational health. That includes credentialing of religious professionals, creating resource materials, consulting with congregations, etc.

2. Focus energy on creating a movement beyond the congregation

I envision a UU movement that is composed of a mix of congregations and a variety of other structures. People should be able to connect to our religious movement in a variety of ways and at different levels of commitment. (They do this in congregations and always have.) Some people would concentrate on spirituality in small groups. Some (a lot, probably) would get involved in justice issues like marriage equality, environmental justice and immigration reform. Others groupings would be “identity based” like Spanish language groups or seminarians and religious professionals of color. We cannot predict the groups that would form or which ones would be the most vital.

The UUA’s role would be to provide the container, the technological foundation, leadership and coordination. We become a resource, a platform and a hub. This is not just about developing a set of programs, but finding a way for us to learn a new way as an institution.

Summary

The central conviction driving this proposal is that our core values appeal to far more people than are attracted to (or likely to be attracted to) our congregations. We have always treated this as a problem to be solved by devising ways to get people to become members of our congregations. But the reality of today’s world is that not everyone who shares our core values will want to become part of a traditional congregation. The fact that so many share our values is an enormous opportunity, not a problem. The future relevance of our faith may well depend on whether we can create a religious movement beyond, as well as within, the parish. I am confident that together we can seize this historic opportunity for our faith.