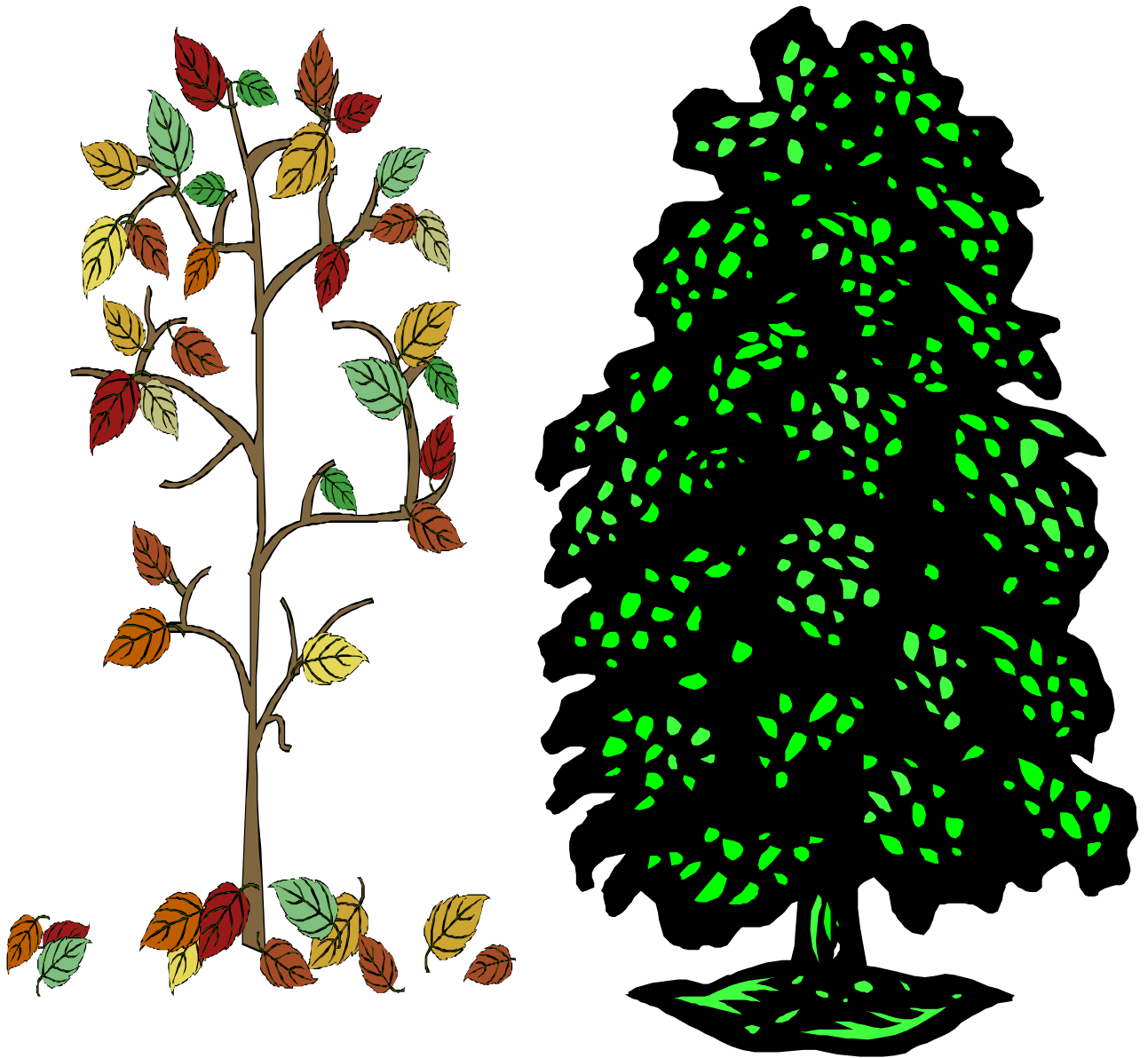


Size Transitions in Unitarian Universalist Congregations



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

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"Change is inevitable; misery is optional."

Growth Is Natural and Shows the Welcoming Aspect of Our Identity

If all congregations kept the same members, stayed the same size, retained the same minister and staff members, and always had the same well-known set of issues, religious life would be easy. It would also be fabulously boring. It is exciting to welcome new guests, hear new sermons, and puzzle over new challenges, but it is not easy. Getting used to change is the hardest change of all.

That "change is inevitable; misery is optional" is truer than many of us care to admit. Somehow, we imagine that it is possible to live without change. Actually, we can no more live and not have change than we can jump without feeling the impact of gravity. In each case, inevitability links the two. To live is to grow; to grow is to change. Therefore, to live is to change, and any thought that we can avoid change in life is pure illusion.

Research on Changes in Congregation Size

People actually study church as an academic subject. Academics examine the subject, and then consultants turn the findings into models. The serious study of what makes a church work is known as ecclesiology, from Greek roots meaning "called to assemble" or "a congregation." The participation of persons in religious organizations is a response to an inner call of sorts. Congregants become involved in religious congregations because of a faith in the good purposes they attribute to them—and out of a hope that their lives will become animated by such good purposes.

Just as individuals find it hard to make lasting changes in their personal habits, congregations resist changes in their lives as well. The challenges of change in congregations, particularly the changes that are a part of transitions in size, have been an area of focus for ecclesiologists trying to help congregations adjust in healthy ways.

Congregation Size Types

Arlin Rothauge, working for the Episcopal Church as a staff officer for congregational development, developed a model of evaluating congregations' evangelical capacity based on congregation size. He wrote a small training manual entitled *Sizing Up the Congregation for New Membership Ministry*. This manual, intended as an in-house Episcopal document, became grist for ecclesial study. Today Rothauge's typologies form the basis for much of the consulting in mainline denominations. The size types, which are based on worship attendance numbers, follow:

- Family size (0 to 50).
- Pastoral size (50 to 150).
- Program size (150 to 350).
- Corporate size (350 to 500+).

Although Rothauge intended his book to stir evangelism, it caused a greater stir as a useful method for explaining why programs do not succeed across all congregations and why experienced ministers can be very effective in one congregation and ineffective in another.

Congregation Size Descriptions and Transitions

Alice Mann, another Episcopal priest, has furthered the study of sizes by examining the transitions between sizes. Her consideration of the size types and the special challenges that congregations of each size face in the "letting go" and "taking on" of appropriate practices has proved richly insightful to congregational leaders, ministers, staff members, and consultants who attempt to further congregational health. The typologies that Mann defined offer a practical glimpse into size typologies, but to gain real insight into her contributions, please explore her very readable books. (Note: Mann differs slightly from Rothauge in her use of types, changing the lower boundary of corporate size to 400 from Rothauge's 350. Please see the References list at the end of this document.)

Family Size Congregations

A family size congregation is a small congregation that operates like an extended family (and that may in fact be a biological family network). Just as in the famous tavern from the television series Cheers, in a family size congregation, "everybody knows your name." This church organizes around one or two anchoring figures that Rothauge calls matriarchs or patriarchs to indicate their tacit authority in the system. Such congregations often have part-time ministers who tend to adopt the chaplain role—leading worship and giving pastoral care. A minister who challenges the authority of a matriarch or patriarch, or who presumes to be the primary leader of the congregation, generally will not stay long.

Pastoral Size Congregations

A pastoral size congregation is a coalition of two or three family and friendship networks unified around the person and role of the minister. The minister maintains a direct ministerial relationship with each member by coordinating the work of a small leadership circle, personally conducting worship, and leading small group programs such as adult religious study. The governing board usually operates like a committee, arranging much of the day-to-day life of the congregation. Members recognize each other's faces, know most people's names, and notice if someone new is present at worship.

Program Size Congregations

The program size congregation is known for the quality and variety of its programs. Separate programs for children, youth, couples, seniors, and other age and interest groups provide entry points to congregational life for a wide range of people. The minister's crucial role is to recruit, equip, and inspire a small circle of key program leaders—lay and ordained, paid and unpaid. This ring of leadership might include the

choir director, the director of religious education, the adult education director, and the new member committee chair. Working as a team with the minister, these leaders reach out to involve others as program participants and as leaders. The leadership circle shares broadly in decision making (among perhaps fifty people), and the laity share pastoral care.

Corporate Size Congregations

Excellence in worship and music, as well as a range and diversity of programs, characterizes the corporate size congregation. Specialized ministries focus on narrowly identified groups of people; several of these programs have a reputation beyond the congregation for their excellence. Often, distinct subcongregations form around multiple worship services. The senior minister spends more time preparing to preach and lead worship than do most ministers and must be skilled at working with a diverse staff of full-time professional leaders. A multilayered structure of staff, boards, and committees make decisions. While ministers continue to provide pastoral care, especially in crisis moments, most members find their spiritual support in small groups or from lay visitors.

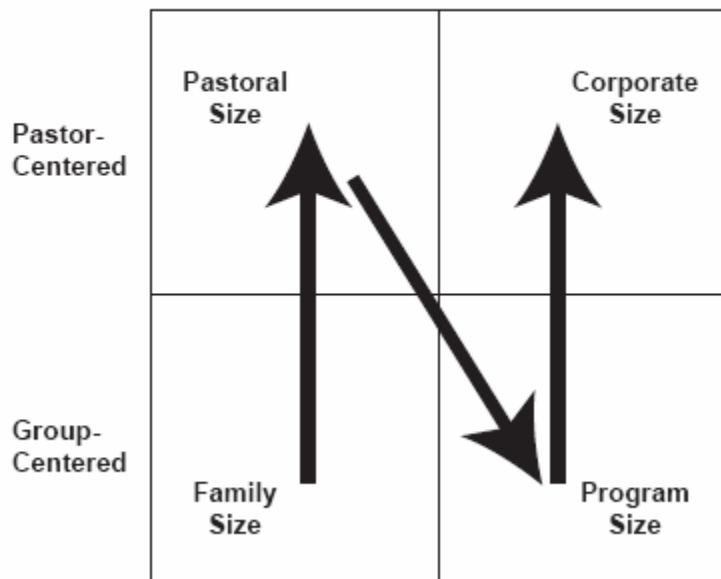
Congregation Size Dynamics

Mann's research helps to explain the frequent tendency of congregations to plateau at the sizes at which transitions are required. Two dynamics work together to define the size plateau. First, the techniques used to hold the congregation together must change when the congregation attains a new size. Second, resistance to changing the central pull of the congregation (be it minister or family leader) is strong.

The first dynamic grows out of the reality that smaller-sized congregations, family and pastoral sizes, are single-celled organisms. They function as one whole and resist further division. In the family size, "everyone knows everyone." In the pastoral size, the minister knows everyone. Their respective sizes seem to be the practical limits at which members and ministers can handle "knowing" well. Any additional growth makes these techniques of interacting and caring ineffective. The techniques themselves undermine future growth to program size or larger. The continued use of those former practices as the congregation size increases then leads to an attendance plateau.

The second dynamic recognizes that there is a resistance to any changes in what holds the center of congregational life. In a family congregation, the whole group occupies the center. In a pastoral congregation, the minister is at the center. In a program congregation, focus returns to the group. For example, the size transition of family to pastoral size requires that the center of the congregation change from being the group to being the minister.

Size Transition "N-Curve"



It is in the transition between pastoral and program size that congregations face the greatest transition. (Mann's N-Curve illustrates the dual adaptations needed in that transition.) Congregants resist the loss of the minister relationship that moving to a program congregation necessitates. They also resist the transition from being a single-celled organic whole to becoming a multicelled organizational structure.

Six Transitions

Transitions between any two congregation sizes (in either an up or a down direction with regard to attendance) have particular characteristics. Six transitions are possible:

- Family to pastoral.
- Pastoral to family.
- Pastoral to program.
- Program to pastoral.
- Program to corporate.
- Corporate to program.

Mann profiles the critical issues that appear in each transition. In general, she asks us to be aware of the following dynamics. In moving from small to large sizes, congregations find it hard to retain the democratic feel, to discover the necessary talent, and to ask clergy accustomed to other roles to assume new ones. Conversely, moving from larger to smaller sizes involves possible loss of esteem and status, a different kind of clergy roll redefinition, and the difficulties of excess buildings. Mann argues that when demographics lead to anticipation of smaller sizes or no growth, responding with care and foresight is as necessary as when growth is anticipated.

Mann's work contains exercises that might be adapted to Unitarian Universalist congregations faced with growth in an upward or downward direction.

Size Transitions in Unitarian Universalist Congregations

When these church size typologies are described in any Unitarian Universalist group, someone will always comment that they apply to Christian churches, but "we're different." Mann has worked extensively with Unitarian Universalist congregations making pastoral to program size transitions, however, and has found no reason to think we are atypical. Perhaps we desire to be above average or imagine that our noncreedal status exempts us from size change difficulties. Nothing could be less true. We live out the typologies as well as the most fervent Christian church, because we are just as human as they are.

For this reason, honoring Mann's insight into what makes larger congregations succeed can help our movement. Mann advises us to take time to understand who we are culturally and then use what we learn to create a foundation for change. (It is worth noting here that these first two steps are similar to the practices of "appreciative inquiry," wherein the congregation relates what it values in its past to its the planned future. For examples of how appreciative inquiry can assist congregations in the cultural discovery process, read the work of Mark Lau Branson.)

Mann also suggests efforts to bring forward democratic and discernment practices in congregations that wish to break through barriers to growth. Democratic practices are assumed to be in place in most Unitarian Universalist congregations. If anything impedes our democratic ways, it is our resistance to something other than the principle of one person, one vote. Multiple voting techniques and innovation sometimes garner a gasp inside our centuries'-old congregations. Being open to change means we cling only to principles, not to methods. We surely hold democracy strongly enough that it can endure a little experimentation. For example, trying a consensus process can be fruitful and efficient, while still congruent with democratic principles.

Mann's suggestion of bringing forward discernment practices in congregations is less practiced, because the term discernment it is often used to refer to "discernment of God's will." The fact is, however, that Unitarian Universalist theists and atheists all can equally join in community discernment in a diverse continuum of forms—from forms similar to the Quaker meeting to forms that use "open space" technology (a system of holding open meetings; to learn more refer to www.mywiseowl.com/articles/Open_Space_Technology). What discernment requires is a willingness to show up, listen openly, and speak truthfully. Few congregations are willing to sit in silence with one another for long periods—until they try it, at which time it becomes clear that some people take to it with ease. Being willing to try new forms of discovery should come to our Unitarian Universalist congregations as naturally as does a lack of orthodoxy.

As Unitarian Universalists, we need to be aware that we are not immune to the pressures of demographics that Protestant and other congregations face. Between 1995 and 2005, a total of 433 Unitarian Universalist congregations out of 1,040 (42 percent) lost members or did not grow at all. Even more amazing is that the 104 fastest-growing Unitarian Universalist congregations (10 percent of the total number of congregations) had 107 percent of all the growth (meaning they compensated for the losses of the net balance of congregations). Losses are not uncommon. Indeed, 289 Unitarian Universalist congregations experienced losses in the double digits over that ten-year period. Although the United States population increasingly adopts Unitarian Universalist values, few appear to see our religion as having meaning and relevance.

With such evidence, we Unitarian Universalists must recognize our need to overcome size plateaus, our resistance to changes in congregational life, and any attitudes we hold that neglect those who seek our saving faith. The status quo of loss, if allowed to continue, will lead to eventual extinction for some of our congregations. The dreams of congregation members who over the centuries strived to establish and preserve traditions of congregational governance and the free church are fragile still. Our will to foster vital and healthy congregations is all that protects these congregations, and the principles they embody, from irrelevance.

References

Arlin Rothauge, *Sizing Up the Congregation for New Membership Ministry* (New York: Episcopal Church Center, undated; available from Episcopal Parish Services, 800-903-5544).

The discussion of corporate size congregations and Alice Mann's "N-Curve" is based on her book *Raising the Roof: The Pastoral-to-Program Size Transition* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2001), p. 12.

Mann's descriptions of the critical issues that appear in each congregation size transition are described in Beth Ann Gaede, ed., *Size Transitions in Congregations* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2001), p. 54.

For examples of how appreciative inquiry can assist the cultural discovery process, read Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes and Conversations* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2004).