THE PROBLEM OF RETENTION IN UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM
By Rev. Christana Wille McKnight

Background

Over the last 40 years, Unitarian Universalism has emerged as a transformative movement in the United States. Our denomination has become a haven for people from a variety of faith backgrounds, well regarded for its acceptance of people regardless of race, creed, ethnicity, sexual orientation or physical or mental ability. Despite our success in welcoming people from other faiths into the Unitarian Universalist fold, we have not been as successful retaining as adult members people who have been raised from childhood as Unitarian Universalists.

The cost of losing so many of the adult children that are raised in our faith is staggering.

- **Spiritual losses** - Raised UUs offer an important faith perspective and depth of experience to our congregations.
- **Emotional losses** - The sense of rejection that countless raised UUs have experienced as they attempt to integrate into the adult church is a mark of shame on our welcoming faith.
- **Financial losses** - The amount of potential dollars lost each time a raised UU walks out the door is enormous.
- **Numerical losses** - Our denomination is struggling against a wide range of factors that prevent us from achieving even a 2% annual growth rate, while a significant source of growth departs from the denomination each year in the form of raised UUs.

Comparative Retention Statistics

There has never been a statistically significant longitudinal study conducted on the retention rates of Unitarian Universalists who have been raised in the denomination. However, according to cross-sectional studies conducted by the denomination over the last four decades, it has been found that an average of approximately 12.5% of all adult UUs self identify as being raised UU or in one of the pre-merger denominations. A comparison with numbers provided to the author by other denominations show that Unitarian Universalists have a significantly smaller proportion of adults as members who

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were raised in the faith than other comparable Protestant denominations in the United States:

- 44% of all adult Presbyterian members were raised Presbyterian.²
- 48% of all adult United Church of Christ members were raised UCC or in one of the pre-merger denominations.³
- 50% of all adult Episcopalian members were raised Episcopalian.⁴
- 67% of all Evangelical Lutheran members were raised Evangelical Lutheran.⁵
  (No figures were available from the Baptist or United Methodist denominations)

These denominations report an average rate of over 52% of their populations raised in their church, as compared to an average of 12.5% for our denomination. While this significant difference in the proportion of adult members raised in the faith could be attributable to our adult conversion rate and overall growth as a religion, an analysis of growth statistics over the last decade make this conclusion highly unlikely.

**UU “Lost Growth Opportunity” Statistics**

Adult membership statistics from the Office of District Services of the Unitarian Universalist Association for 1998 through 2009 are attached as Table I. An analysis of these statistics tells us the following:

- The mean adult membership census for the period in question is 150,474.
- The average annual adult membership growth during that time frame was 1,174 members, or an approximate average annual growth rate of 0.78%.
- Since an average of 12.5% of our adult members report have been raised UU, it can be concluded that we are gaining approximately 147 raised UUs in the denomination annually.
- The Young Adult and Campus Ministry Office of the UUA estimates that over the last decade, approximately 4,000 young people have graduated annually from religious education programs.⁶

² Smith-Williams, Ida. Associate for Research and Information, Presbyterian Church, USA. “Raised Presbyterian.” Email to the author. 9 Feb 2009.
³ Shellhammer, Destiny. Minister for Research Information and Services, United Church of Christ. “Raised UCC.” Email to the author. 9 March 2009.
⁴ Alexis-Earvin, Donna. Research Assistant, Episcopal Church Center. “Raised in the Church.” Email to the author. 10 Feb 2009.
⁵ Taylor, Dann. Research Analyst, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. “Those that were raised in the church and remain in the church as adults.” Email to the author. 11 Feb 2009.
• Assuming 50% of the raised UUs who graduate from religious education every year could be retained as adult members, that would produce an average annual growth rate of 2,000 raised UUs.

• This represents a lost growth opportunity of 1,853 members per year – significantly more than our average annual adult membership growth during the past decade.

**Why Do Raised UUs Leave**

Research and reason point to four key reasons for our low retention rates. These conclusions have been drawn from research conducted from 2004 to 2009 by the author and are supported by the 2005 Commission on Appraisal report *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*.

• **A lack of religious identity and commitment.** The Commission report states: “We have a common desire not to indoctrinate our children, to leave them free to determine their own truth. This is a noble aspiration, but have we taken it too far? Perhaps children don’t get anything to hold onto now and they ultimately find themselves adrift in a confusing and frightening world. As a participant in one of our youth focus groups said ‘Adults are concerned about influencing what kids believe, but being influenced by other people is how we figure out what we believe; it’s the only way it can happen.’”

• **A significant difference between the religious education program and the adult church.** The Commission report found that “The way UUs raise our children seems to prepare them for something completely different than what Unitarian Universalism actually offers. This suggests that UUs should change one or the other (or both).”

• **An historical culture of focusing the adult church experience around meeting the needs of people who have not been raised in our faith.** From the Commission again: “Born-inners, it seems, have some different religious needs than come-inners.”

• **Congregational challenges with accepting and encouraging raised UUs to be in positions of power and authority within the church.** The Commission

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7 This research has primarily taken the form of primary source conversations with raised UUs, denominational ministers, District staff, as well as readings and sermons from denominational leaders and theologians.


10 Ibid.
summarized its conversations with youth in our denomination as follows: “Once people are fourteen or fifteen years old, these youth told us, they need to be incorporated into the larger community; ‘If you want to ‘mind the gap,’ you need to meld it more; bring the generations together, get you and adults interacting more. Current structures create too much separation of the generations.”

Some progress is being made in addressing these issues on local, district and national levels. For example, the Tapestry of Faith resources made available by the UUA Lifespan Faith Development Department have several sections that focus on religious identity. Additionally, the young adult movement around the country has been working tirelessly to integrate young adults (many of whom are raised UUs) into the fabric of church life. However, if we are going to fully support as adults, the children and youth who were raised in our congregations, grow as a denomination, and encourage spiritual depth at a new level, further action is necessary.

**What Actions Can Be Taken To Retain Raised UUs**

There are several steps that we can take to strengthen our ability to retain Unitarian Universalists who have been raised in the church. These can include, but are certainly not limited to:

- Creating and disseminating rituals for families and congregations that are distinctively Unitarian Universalist.
- Creating and disseminating resources for both youth and congregations to guide them through the process of bringing a raised UU into the adult church, specifically addressing differences between religious education and adult church.
- Educating ministers and laity about how the experiences and needs of adult members who are raised UU may differ from congregants who were previously unchurched or raised in other faiths.
- Educating ministers and laity around the gifts that raised UUs offer to congregations, and how those gifts could positively impact the church.

It is important to acknowledge that actively working towards retaining raised UUs as adults does not necessarily require a drastic shift in our current structure. In fact, if we hope to keep raised UUs consistently as a growing demographic in our denomination, we must incorporate their needs and wants into our existing establishments rather than creating parallel realities for them to exist in. Dialogue and education will be an essential component of this process, as well as heightened awareness on the part of our leaders to the imperative nature of this call.

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Market research indicates that it is significantly easier and more cost-effective to retain a person who is a member of any given group – whether client, constituent, or congregant - than to recruit new members. It is time for us to acknowledge that the loss of so many raised UUs negatively impacts our movement in many ways, to acknowledge the systemic issues that contribute to our low retention rate, and to take steps to address this solvable problem. By devoting a proportionally small amount of resources to retaining raised UUs as adult members, we have tremendous potential to grow as a transformative faith in the world.