

Growing a Church
Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo
Sunday, October 16, 2011
Rev. Margret A. O’Neill

I am a gardener, fundamentally. No, I don’t mean I’m related to Bill and Marge Gardner, beloved members of this church, though who knows, we are all related to each other somehow. What I mean is that one of my deepest loves is to plant a seed or a bulb, a sapling or a seedling, tend it and watch it grow. Planting, tending, nurturing and supporting, sometimes trimming or staking, turning over the rich earth and willing something new and fresh to grow, are all acts of love that open my heart and help me know who I am.

One of my first purchases when I arrived in Buffalo this summer was a basil plant that I found on my first trip to Wegmen’s, then some flowers and herbs at the neighborhood co-op market over by the 5-Points Bakery on Rhode Island Street, and some parsley plants at the Lexington co-op. My little garden is thriving.

My mother was a Missouri farm girl transplanted to the suburbs of New York City. All the years I can remember, there were flowers and fruit and vegetables in our yard – early photos of me as a toddler show me standing among tulips as tall as I was, and I learned to pick beans and shuck corn, to make peach preserves and cucumber pickles at my mother’s side. So gardening comes naturally to me.

A church is a garden of sorts. We have our nursery where the fresh young human sprouts are tended with care and love, the religious education programs to help us all, child and teen and adult, grow in strength and wisdom. We have this sanctuary where we fertilize our minds and hearts to support our development into our full human potential, and just outside these doors is our memorial garden where we place the ashes of those who have passed from our midst.

And as a garden, a church and its congregation are an organic, growing, dynamic system, so similar in many ways to a biological system, a system in the plant or animal kingdoms. We feel rooted in our traditions as a tree is rooted in the earth; we reach toward the light of understanding as a sunflower bends toward the sun. We depend on each other, support and defend each other, like the creatures in a pack or a flock or a herd – or perhaps sometimes like a gaggle or like a buzzing hive.

Our theme for today, and for this season of generosity, is “come grow a church with me.” The first thing we think of with growth is size, of course. Growing can mean getting bigger, and getting bigger can be a sign of health, a sign of a flourishing tomato plant or a healthy child or puppy – just about any organism. But we also understand that for a plant or animal, healthy growth is not only about size. We have all seen pale, spindly plants that grow tall without enough light or fertility to make them healthy. And we know that getting larger is not always a marker of health for a person or another member of the animal kingdom -- bigger is not always better. As so as we understand that churches are organic and dynamic and that they grow, we also understand that size is only one marker of health in a church. Size is a marker, declining

size can be a sign of trouble, so we pay attention to numbers, but that is not all we need to pay attention to.

Some years ago, an Anglican bishop named Ted Buckle identified four types of church growth, and then Loren Mead wrote about them in his book *More Than Numbers: the Way Churches Grow*. These types of growth are: numerical (growth you can count), maturational (growth in spiritual maturity), organic or organizational (development of structures and processes to make decisions and take action in a healthy way), and incarnational (having an impact in the world, making real and living the values of our faith story).

What we are learning these days, both from church experts and from our newest members and friends, is that maturational growth, organic growth, and incarnational growth in today's congregations are more important than the size of a church. People don't come in our doors asking how many members we have. They are more likely to be looking for their own opportunities to grow in spiritual maturity.

They are seeking support to come to a better understanding of their place in the world, how to cope with the pressures of modern life, how to live in closer alignment with their values. That is a way we grow as human beings – that is what spiritual growth means, growing to live in closer alignment with our values. This church can grow that way – continuing to develop the spiritual sides of ourselves as a congregation as well as individually, the part of ourselves that engages with our values and brings them into all parts of our lives. Growing in spirit -- let's sing about it. Let's sing,

Come grow in spirit with me

Part of being a church in our democratic tradition includes organic growth, growing a healthy process of which everyone can be a part, where we have a voice in the decisions, and where things are well organized and the garden carefully tended. When we invest ourselves in a church, as a volunteer or with a financial contribution, we want to be sure that investment of our resources will be used wisely and well, to provide the programs that help us grow, and to make a difference in the world. We are looking for a church that is a healthy organization, one that is continuing to explore and develop in its organic growth.

And people come to our doors looking for a church that is growing into incarnational maturity, seeking ever better and more effective ways of bringing our values into the world, demonstrating what we stand for through our actions and our commitments. It is time now to grow a church will bear strong and compelling witness for a world of peace and justice.

Our society is hungry for integrity in a world too often characterized by cynicism and greed, for wholeness in a world that can be divisive and hateful, for spiritual nourishment in a world that can be desolate and despairing, for positive action in a world that can be all about posturing and empty promises. Incarnating our values, helping to create a world of greater peace and justice, changing the world for the better -- let's sing about it. Let's sing,

Come change the world with me

Stewardship is the art and science of growing a church, growing this beloved community in ways that are numerical, spiritual, organic and incarnational. It is often said that what is required of members and friends to sustain a church are their time, their talent and their treasure. All three are crucial to the excellence that this congregation creates, and to the rich experience of being part of this community.

We bring our time – perhaps that is most precious resource of all – not only to be present on Sunday morning for this collective experience of singing, speaking and listening together, but on all the other days of the week to create the functions that make the church work, from dusting the pews to mowing the lawn, from making soup to making policy. And we invest our time in simply being together, at international dinners and RE potlucks, at auction events, attending meetings or teaching religious education, taking classes, volunteering and being present in myriad ways. Our time makes this church what it is.

We bring our talent, the gifts with which we were born, perhaps the strong singing voice we bring to the choir, or artistic talent to create beauty in a lovely garden. Some bring an outgoing personality and a wonderful smile to offer to newcomers at the welcome table. And we bring the skills we have developed, skills in finance or law, in music or landscape design, to enrich the church in all ways, creating a vital, sustainable, beautiful presence of liberal religion in this corner of the Niagara frontier. Our talent makes this church what it is.

And we make a commitment to the church from our treasure, because it takes money to create and sustain a church. I have been known to strike terror into the hearts of church treasurers and accountants by saying that money is not real, and that it is love that is real. What I mean, of course, is that the money that we have, and the money that we spend or invest, is only as real as it shows itself to be a token of our love.

The way we choose to use our treasure manifests our commitments, allows us to put into action what is important to us. What we do with our treasure, our money, is one important way we put forth our love, which is inherently intangible, and give that love and commitment a tangible presence in the world. Our treasure, our money, also makes this church what it is, as we put our money where our hearts are.

We are entering a pivotal time in the life of this church, this intentional period of developmental ministry, preparing to move into the next chapter of this church's long and rich history. This is a time to build on the successes and investments of the past, a time to commit to and invest in the future. There is a strong drive to excellence in this church, and a strong commitment to vitality and presence, demonstrating the love that binds the members into this community, and the love you bring to heal the world.

Investing part of my treasure in church is a spiritual practice for me, pledging a portion of my income to this church that manifests and delivers my commitments into the world. For me, pledging is a practice of intentionality and discipline. I discipline myself to live on about ninety percent of my income each year, so that I can give away the other ten percent – half of that goes to church.

Three percent goes to the church I am serving, two percent to the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Larger Fellowship, and then about another five percent to other charitable causes that demonstrate my values and commitments. The five percent to church comes first, off the top of every paycheck. I know not everyone can afford to give away three or four or five percent of their income, but many of us can.

I have not always been a generous pledger, because I did not understand what growing a church was all about, but when I started getting involved in UU churches, when I became aware of the responsibility I have as a member of a church, and when I discovered the rich pleasure of generosity, I began about 12 years ago the practice I continue today. And if you believe in this church as I do, if you believe in this church and what it can offer the world, I urge you to be generous in your pledge for the coming year.

I made a pledge to this church when I started here in August, calculating 3% of my gross income to fill out a pledge card and start making monthly payments. And because I believe in you, and in the richness and generosity and potential I have found here already, I am raising my pledge this year, committing more of my treasure to the financial health of this congregation. Because I believe in you, I want to support the great work that is being done here.

My call and challenge to each of our friends and members is to let go your excuses, pluck up your courage, and join me in pledging generously of your treasure, increase your pledge this year if you can, or let this be the year you make your first pledge if you have not done so before, as together we face the bright future that awaits this church. Let's sing about that, too. Let's sing,

Come, make a pledge with me

So now it's your turn. The Stewardship Team has prepared a beautiful prospectus that has lots of solid information about the results of the investments we make in this church, and ways in which we hope to grow – spiritually, organically and incarnationally. Growth in the number of members is not a goal, but it could be a result if we do a good job of growing this church into its amazing potential.

Every single person who we have identified as a current member of this church, and every person or family who has donated financially to the church even if you have not pledged before, has a personalized packet and pledge card waiting for you in the Parish Hall. If you got a letter from us this past week, there is a packet for you. I plan to go pick mine up and make my pledge today. And if you are so new to the church that we don't know you exist, and you want to provide your financial support to the church, we have some blank packets and pledge cards for you.

We are not planning to do the usual round of phone calls from the stewardship team to get people to turn in their pledge cards this year. We figure you know how to get a card to us, and we don't really need to hound you. What we do have, however, is an incentive to turn in your pledge card in time for us to make final plans for the budget for 2012. The stewardship team has pitched in to donate to the church a newly released Kindle Fire that will be given away to one of the church members or friends who pledges this year.

If you turn in your completed pledge card on or before Sunday, December 18, your pledge card will become your entry for a drawing to be held at the end of the pledge campaign – the lucky winner will receive a Kindle Fire. For those of you who don't keep up with the newest technology, the Kindle is what is called an e-reader – e for electronic – a slim little screen that you can read a book on.

The newest edition of Kindle, the Fire, adds a color screen and gives you the ability to download 18 million movies, TV shows, songs, magazines, and books, browse the web, and all sorts of other applications. When I saw the ad for it, I wanted one! Even if you are not in the market for an e-reader yourself, it makes a GREAT gift, so although the church is your reason to pledge, the Kindle might be your reason to get your pledge card in by December 18. Sooner is better, of course.

Even as we are grateful for all those who grow up around us like a garden, for old friends, nodding like sunflowers in the evening-time, and young friends coming on as fast as radishes, for all the rich connections we cultivate in this beloved community, may we step with power into the possibility for this garden to grow and flourish. This congregation is deeply imbued with wisdom, with strength, with resourcefulness, commitment and generosity. As we grow this garden of faith and commitment, may we give thanks always for the hope and possibility we create together. So may it be, and amen.

And now, please rise in body or spirit and join in our closing hymn, just one final verse, we will sing Come, *Grow a Church With Me*

Sources:

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