

Growth By Association

Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo

October 2, 2011

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Liza had discovered a Unitarian Universalist congregation not far from her home. She went once, kind of liked it, and went back the following week. And again the next week.

By now she had been there maybe 5 or 6 times. She had begun to recognize a few folks, and she figured maybe a couple of people even knew her name. Liza is quite shy, not one who is quick to get involved. But she had showed up pretty much every week for nearly 2 months and was beginning to feel like a regular.

Well, on this particular day, she called up all of the recessive extroverted genes she could muster and stayed for fellowship hour. After a few minutes of chit-chat, she was ready to head out. Well, when she went to put her coffee mug on the kitchen counter, she discovered a couple of women speaking in agitated tones as they washed and dried dishes. And there were tons of dishes – plates stacked high, mugs scattered all over the counter, silverware, serving trays, empty cracker boxes, you name it. Liza remembered hearing about a big event at the church the night before.

As one woman gestured in frustration, Liza overheard her say, “Well, who? Who can we get? Who could do it all?”

The other woman, her hands submerged in soapy water, shrugged. “I think we’ve already asked everyone.”

That’s when Liza had the aha moment. She realized that in order for church to work, everybody needed to do their part. She couldn’t just show up for worship and leave. She wasn’t a taker. Liza surveyed the piles of plates and the stacks of saucers and the mountains of mugs.

And she found herself saying, “I can help. I can do it.”

And the kitchen ladies were relieved and delighted. Thrilled, actually, because Liza had just agreed to be their new Director of Religious Education!

Liza confessed to me, “I didn’t know how to tell them that I was just volunteering to help with the dishes. So I took the job!” Liza was that congregation’s religious educator for a number of years – and as luck would have it, she was a fine one.

We can laugh at this story, but the truth is that congregations often aren’t terribly deliberate about hiring and supporting their professional staff.

Now before I say any more about staff, I want to talk about growth. When I use the word Growth, I am really talking about Health, congregational health.

In his book “More Than Numbers: The Way Churches Grow,” congregational vitality expert Loren Mead describes 4 Types of Growth.

The first is numerical growth. This is often what we think of when we hear the word “growth”. The nice thing about numerical growth is that it is easy to measure – worship attendance, religious education program enrollment, number of adult faith development classes, and so on. But the problem with counting things is that while numbers may indicate that things are going well, they are do not, by themselves, stand for health.

So let me describe the 3 other types of growth.

Maturation growth is what Mead calls “growth in wisdom.” Maturation growth means that individual members are deepening in their faith. So, it has to do with spiritual health and religious formation. These may happen through quality worship and small group ministry, among other activities.

Organic growth is described as “growth in strength.” Organic growth means that the congregation is enhancing its systems and structures for organizational health. Examples are creating more effective meeting protocols and improving communication vehicles.

Incarnational growth is growth in action – The congregation is expanding community efforts and social justice initiatives, forming healthy relationships between itself and the larger world.

Numerical - numbers. Maturation – faith-deepening. Organic - organizational. Incarnational - action. I have done some work with congregations using this framework and I think it can be very useful. But there’s something missing for me. And it’s probably missing because Loren Mead is not a Unitarian Universalist.

You have probably heard it stated that our faith is covenantal rather than creedal. In other words, it has to do with agreements about our relationships with one another, rather than agreements about what we believe. Well, that’s all well and good, but here’s what sometimes gets lost:

The Unitarian Universalist Association is an Association of Congregations. When we speak of being a covenantal religion, the covenant is not just within individual congregations but among them. Our congregations are intended to be in relationship, in Association. And that’s the piece that is not made explicit in Loren Mead’s 4 Types of Growth.

So I have added a 5th type of growth. Mead won’t re-write his book because of me, but I did get the blessing of a couple of folks in the UUA Growth Office , so that makes it kind of official.

The 5th type of growth I call Associational Growth. It means that a congregation is increasing in its engagement with our larger faith movement. It happens when members attend district events. (Did you know that this congregation has sent 12 people to our regional regional leadership school over the past 2 summers! Woohoo! I think that’s the most of any congregation in the district. And some of you went to Leadership day yesterday in Syr?) Associational Growth happens when you reach out to neighboring congregations. (Bill Parke, are you here? Bill has been instrumental in getting the cluster of UU congregations in Western New York congregations connected.) Associational growth happens when the congregation pays its fair share dues to the District and to the UUA, and when it sends informed delegates to District and General Assemblies. It happens when members take on UU leadership roles beyond the walls of their congregations, and when staff take roles in their professional organizations.

Associational Growth honors the covenantal nature of our faith. It is good for your congregation. It is critical for the health of Unitarian Universalism.

So, back to professional staff. A congregation's paid leaders are ideally key connectors to this larger whole of our faith. This definitely holds true for your congregation.

First, you have Margret with you during your ministerial transition - this crucial and fascinating in-between time – and her presence here links you with the UUA Transitions Office. Part of Margret's job as your interim minister is to help you renew and reinforce your connections with the Association – making sure you are aware of expertise and resources that can help your congregation now and in the future, and encouraging you to be in covenant with fellow congregations and with the UUA.

Your religious educator, Sonja Jensen, also has denominational connections that add to the life of this congregation. Sonja is a member of the Liberal Religious Educators Association. She is active in our upstate New York chapter and participates in continental conferences, where she receives wisdom and insight and shares her own. And Sonja takes her professional development seriously. She is a candidate in the UUA's rigorous Religious Education Credentialing Program, which keeps her connected with her fabulous mentor and with me.

And Barbara Wagner, your Minister of Music, has been involved extra-congregationally in more ways than I know. And if I knew them all, I wouldn't have time to list them here. Are you folks all aware that Barb chaired the committee that created the awesome Singing the Journey hymnal?

I hope you know how fortunate you are to have these gifted, committed professional leaders who not only serve you, but work to make the whole of our faith stronger. Hats off to you for supporting your staff and having high expectations of them.

We in the business of faith formation pay attention to societal trends that influence religious life, which is actually just about everything. Let me tell you just a little of what we are seeing – no big surprises here.

- Participation in organized religion has been on the decline, in general. More and more people have never had a religious affiliation. Many folks claim to be spiritual but not religious.
- Our nation is becoming more culturally diverse.
- Advances in technology and social media are changing the way we communicate and do business.
- Changes in family patterns and structures are making regular, whole-household church participation a struggle.

I am convinced that we can make all of these things work in our favor, with some creative thinking and innovative approaches. Perhaps the most important ingredient for meeting these challenges is well-equipped professional staff. So we need to be intentional and savvy in recruiting, preparing, and supporting our religious leaders. As noted in the recently-released Strategic Plan for Professional Ministries, commissioned by UUA President Peter Morales, in order to live up to our potential, “we must equip our religious professionals to be cross-culturally competent, strategic in the use of technology, entrepreneurial as leaders, deeply grounded in theology, and resilient in the face of new challenges.”

And that's why this fifth annual Association Sunday is dedicated to Celebrating Excellence in Ministries. Your special contribution this morning will be pooled with those of Unitarian Universalists from across the Association. This year's Association Sunday is unique in that it is a partnership with our professional organizations. The UU Ministers' Association, the UU Musicians' Network, and the Liberal Religious Educators Association are submitting proposals for how to utilize these Association Sunday funds. Ideas under discussion include inventive continuing education programs, assessment projects, and scholarships to make learning opportunities accessible to more of our talented professionals.

One unique requirement that's been built in is that the Ministers', Musicians', and religious educators' professional organizations must submit at least one joint proposal. Not that they had to be coerced! There is a lot of excitement about this! The leaders and members of these organizations get it that collaboration is key, that amazing things happen when their ministries mingle.

The staff at the UUA get it, too. I started my job on July 1, working from a newly-crafted job description. (As Margret mentioned), One emerging piece of my work is promoting and developing training opportunities not just for religious educators and musicians but also for whole staff teams. We are all eager to witness the synergy of professionals working together purposefully in new ways.

The word Religion derives from the Latin, ligare, to bind or connect – you know, like ligaments. Your religious life is what connects you with your deepest inner self and with that which is infinitely bigger than yourself. Unitarian Universalism, in particular, emphasizes relationship and covenant – our connections with one another.

Our growth as a faith movement – our health – requires vital connections, Associations – within, beyond, and among our congregations. Our professionals cultivate these connections through their programming and their leadership. Your professional leaders are dedicated to modeling connections through collaboration with staff teammates and through collegial relationships with counterparts in other congregations.

(Sung) Where do we come from? Where do we come from? We come from a tradition that lifts up covenant within the congregation but often forgets the Associational aspect. We've come from a habit of depending too much on luck to attract people to our professional positions – recall the chance over-the-counter encounter that led to Liza's hiring. We've been accustomed to a congregational culture in which staff leaders each oversee their own area of responsibility, often essentially unsupervised, lacking a cohesive plan to integrate their ministries and without intentionality about goal-setting, assessment, and professional development.

(Sung) What are we? What are we? We are people – professional staff, volunteers, and congregation members – committed to making our faith stronger, our lives more meaning-filled, and our world better.

(Sung) Where are we going? Where are we going? We are on a journey to a new place, to a promised land of sorts. In the face of today's and tomorrow's challenges, we're looking at all 5 types of growth with fresh eyes. We'll explore new ways of being and doing. We'll be associating resourcefully with other congregations, striving with greater intention to include people of all ages and identities in congregational life, and engaging in transformative shared ministries.

Let us provide our professional staff with the love, the training, and the tools that they need and deserve so that they can lead us confidently and passionately into this Promised Land.

As our journey continues, your financial and spiritual support will help us ever more successfully share the Good News of our faith with the hopeful, the troubled, and the curious souls who seek out our congregations – and with a world that is enriched by our message and our deeds.

Come and Go With Me To That Land.