

# The Membership Journey



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

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# The Membership Journey

How we shudder at the words “evangelize” and “proselytize”! But do you know what the word “evangel” means? It means “good news.”

. . . We need more people . . . and so, by all means, let us—and all Unitarian Universalist churches—come out of hiding and proclaim the faith. Let’s put a light on the sign out there so people can see who we are! Let’s use all the modern methods available to us—including electricity—newsprint, radio, television—to evangelize, proselytize, and convert.

—The Reverend Edward Frost, Senior Minister, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta, Atlanta, Georgia

We cannot simply decide to grow for growth’s sake. The minute we do that, we fall into the downward spiral of sustaining the institution to sustain the institution; a death-knell for any movement. Instead, we must ask what it is we do that is unique, and attainable, and arises out of our faith and tradition.

—The Reverend Dr. Laurel Hallman, Senior Minister, First Unitarian Church of Dallas, Dallas, Texas

These two quotes sum up the conundrums of membership and growth in Unitarian Universalism. Membership development and numerical growth are essential to ensure that Unitarian Universalism remains an option for those seeking its community, intellectual freedom, and affirmation of human goodness and unity. And the ways we attract and welcome newcomers need to grow out of our own particular heritage and our core Unitarian Universalist values.

This document, *The Membership Journey*, first gives an overview of ways in which the congregation can prepare for new members. The text then discusses how to illuminate the membership path for newcomers in sections titled “Beyond the Welcome Mat,” “Deepening the Connections,” “Joining the Congregation,” and “Membership as a Lifelong Journey.”

## OVERVIEW OF A CONGREGATION'S PREPARATION FOR NEW MEMBERS

A congregation's readiness to welcome new members shows in many ways. These characteristics include the following:

- Having knowledge of the various aspects of church growth.
- Having a clear mission to galvanize members and attract newcomers.
- Taking ongoing leadership training for church leaders and program staff.
- Making a conscious decision to intentionally welcome newcomers.
- Wanting to share the "Good News" of Unitarian Universalism with others.
- Creating and maintaining visibility in the community.
- Learning how welcoming the congregation's culture and practices are.
- Having and implementing welcoming, greeter, and membership practices.
- Generating accessibility awareness.
- Developing skills in working in a diverse community.
- Providing opportunities for members' ongoing spiritual development.

The congregation can provide a place for new members to experience spiritual growth while the existing members can grow spiritually in the work that must be done to get ready to welcome new people.



### **Facts about Seekers in Our Congregations**

Studies show that those who enter our doors as seekers are looking for

- Stability.
- A place that feels like “home.”
- A place to be personally recognized and welcomed.

Feeling comfortable is not something that happens right away. Also, feeling comfortable means different things to different people. We need to explore further with members what contributes toward their feeling comfortable and to learn, from both those who do not return and those who leave, what contributed to their discomfort.

When survey participants were asked how long it took them to feel at home in their congregation,

- 42 percent said “immediately!”
- 10 percent said “within one month.”
- 6 percent said “within three months.”
- 5 percent said “within six months.”
- 9 percent said “within a year.”
- 10 percent said “when I joined.”

We also know that it will take time for people to actually decide to join a Unitarian Universalist congregation:

- 26 percent took one to three months of attending to decide.
- 36 percent took three to twelve months to decide.
- 12 percent took a year to decide.
- 18 percent took more than a year to decide.
- 4 percent have not joined.

### **Membership: More Than a Numbers Game**

When we think of membership, we tend to think of numbers. Yet membership in a Unitarian Universalist congregation is as much about *quality* as it is about *quantity*. Unitarian Universalist congregations exist because of the free choice of their members to be “gathered” into covenantal relationship with one another.

To put these points into a historical perspective, the concepts of *free choice* and *gathered* were fairly extraordinary in the days of the early colonial Puritan settlers. Prior to this evolution in church governance, people went to the church of their own parish, which was a geographic location and, thus, an involuntary assignment of membership. The new concept of church became known as the *free church*. As current members of Unitarian Universalist congregations, we continue the covenantal relationship to “walk together” despite our differences in theological perspective. *Walking together* implies undertaking a journey of making meaning, which is very different from adherence to a creed.

In Unitarian Universalism no higher authority creates a congregation; in fact, a congregation is formed only if people are willing to constitute one. Membership, then, is the heart of our Unitarian Universalist congregational life.



Membership is a dynamic process rather than a single act. It begins when one makes the conscious choice to formally affiliate with a particular congregation—yet that decision marks the beginning of the membership journey rather than its end. In *More Than Numbers: The Way Churches Grow*, Loren Mead outlines four dimensions of growth and states that a growing, vital congregation would most likely be attending to each of these four aspects of membership:

***More Than Numbers: The Way Churches Grow***, by Loren Mead, Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1993.

- **Numerical growth** is best calculated by tracking how many attend per week at Sunday morning worship, in Sunday school, and at adult religious education programs. This number represents the active members and is also tied to the size of the budget and the number of activities offered by the congregation. The number of people who are reported by each Unitarian Universalist congregation to be active members is the number the Unitarian Universalist Association certifies annually.
- **Maturation growth** represents opportunities for members to deepen their faith and spiritual roots, as well as to increase their understanding of the spectrum of religious possibilities. This kind of growth also includes the ways in which, and the depth to which, the congregation cares for others. For maturational growth to occur, a congregation must empower members to contribute their unique talents and gifts for the well-being of the whole.
- **Organic growth** is growth of the congregation as a functioning community and an institution that can engage with other institutions of society. The term refers to healthy internal organizational structures such as policies, processes, practices, and programs; recruiting and succession-planning practices for leaders; evaluation mechanisms for programs, volunteers, and paid staff; and practices that deal with conflict openly and honestly.

- **Incarnational growth** is the ability to take the meanings and values of Unitarian Universalism and make them real in the world outside the congregation. A congregation must be able to build itself into a religious community in which people can deepen their spiritual life, be challenged to live out their faith, and engage in the larger community to make the world more loving and just.

### **Unitarian Universalists as Evangelists?**

A growing number of Unitarian Universalists are looking at ways to make sure that we do tell others about our faith—not in a coercive way, but as a way of inviting them into the community and the opportunities for growth that Unitarian Universalism offers. For more ideas on evangelizing Unitarian Universalist style, go to [www.uua.org/ga/ga00/452.html](http://www.uua.org/ga/ga00/452.html).

## **A Clear Mission Can Guide Growth**

In addition to attending to the aspects of membership that have been outlined, having a mission statement is important to growth. A mission statement is more than words on paper; it can also be a guide to the preferred future for your congregation. A guiding mission statement is one that inspires a sense of focus and mission for the congregation, that gives the church a sense of direction, and that acts as a standard against which accomplishments and relationships are measured. For more information about mission statements, see *Vision, Mission, and covenant: Creating a Future Together* at [www.uua.org/cde/education/VisionMissionCovenant.pdf](http://www.uua.org/cde/education/VisionMissionCovenant.pdf).

Attention to making your congregation's mission a living document can help you determine the best directions for sharing Unitarian Universalism.

### **Mission Can Attract Members**

#### **A guiding mission statement**

- ✚ Inspires a sense of focus and ministry for the congregation.
- ✚ Gives the church a sense of direction.
- ✚ Acts as a standard against which accomplishments and relationships are measured.

## The Leader's Role in a Growing Church

New members bring growth to the church, growth brings change, and change involves a personal process for each person. Church lay leaders can help the group of individuals that forms their congregation to navigate the process of change.

The archetype of the architect is useful for defining behaviors and attitudes that leaders in a growing church need. The architect brings aesthetics and utility into harmony with each other, focusing on the strength of the materials while making the building aesthetically pleasing. The goal is the satisfaction of the future occupants. The lay leader with the mindset of an architect cares as much about aesthetics as about practicality, as much about the religious reasons for growth as about the ministry infrastructure supporting growth, and as much about an individual's concerns as about the congregation's vision. Such a person plays the role of facilitator by creating conversations, as well as by providing a place and time for airing concerns and reaching solutions to problems. By definition, a facilitator remains neutral in the discussion, thus expanding the congregation's capacity to integrate all input from the conversation.

In a growing congregation, the leader, as facilitator, does the following:

- Structures time for adaptive work for church members, knowing that during change, the implementation of technical solutions alone—also known as "simply *solving* the problem"—won't produce congregational health, vitality, or growth.
- Holds discussions about values, personal commitment, and the congregation's mission prerequisites for moving forward.
- Focuses conversations on "those who haven't come through our door" and on future generations.
- Schedules frequent opportunities to discuss changing norms and processes and to collaborate in designing new ones.
- Listens with empathy and fosters growth in others.
- Ensures adequate resources to achieve the congregation's dream.

The facilitator in each of us cares as much about the religious reasons for building a vital church community as about the feasibility of a new building project.

For training in congregational leadership, consider participating in a **Planning for Growth and Vitality Weekend Workshop**. These workshops are held for the small or for the smaller mid-size congregation. For information about attending either of these workshops, please see [www.uua.org/cde/education/weekends.html](http://www.uua.org/cde/education/weekends.html).

## Membership and Growth

Thus, membership is about growth in every sense. In the numerical sense, adding members means growth. Existing members, even ones who joined relatively recently, are often wary of numerical growth and the changes that they anticipate it will bring. Based on past experience or simply a fear of the unknown, they may actively work to discourage growth or at least be lukewarm about it. This sort of reticence can lead to ambiguous feelings about new members and a lack of welcoming. Congregations that do not grow, however, will lose members rather than stay stable. Natural attrition will affect congregations, and a failure to bring in new people will result in stagnation and eventually, decline.

Growth does bring change, and change brings awkward feelings and moments that cannot and should not be denied. Such feelings can be discussed in open and honest conversations that also point out the gifts and opportunities that come with additional members.

### **Graceful Actions for Awkward Times**

Growth means change, and change can be uncomfortable. Congregational reticence about growth can be tied to the desire to avoid such awkwardness. A willingness to look intentionally at the awkwardness that growth brings can help people welcome newcomers more wholeheartedly. (For more information, see Alice Mann's presentation at [www.uua.org/cde/midsize2000/theme.html](http://www.uua.org/cde/midsize2000/theme.html).)

Intentional reflection about the kind of growth they want to see will help congregations weather the awkwardness through a driving sense of mission and purpose. Instead of waiting for people to stumble across the congregation and its programming, leaders can ensure that the door is open, the welcome mat is out, and the programming is geared to attract those the congregation seeks to serve. If membership is thought of as a life cycle, then opportunities for all four kinds of growth—numerical, maturational, organic, and incarnational—can be developed. For more information on welcoming practices and getting out the word about Unitarian Universalism in your community, refer to The Uncommon Denomination resources at [www.uua.org/programs/congservices/uncommon/](http://www.uua.org/programs/congservices/uncommon/).



## Fox Valley Chooses Growth

Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist in Appleton, Wisconsin, had one hundred members in 1990; by 2004 its membership had grown to more than four hundred. A conscious decision to grow and to take advantage of its unique assets, including a strong religious education program and its position as one of the only outlets for liberal religion in the area, fueled this growth. Clarity about the need to grow was essential. Deb Andrews was board president when the congregation first began to grow in the 1980s. "One of the things we asked ourselves was, 'Don't we have an obligation to the people who haven't yet found us?' " she said. "And then, the bigger we got, the more things we found we could do, and then we didn't want to do without them—adult education, a choir, small groups."

Andrews said leaders had to help the congregation face the changes that come with growth: "When we were small we all knew we had to play a significant role to keep it going. As we got bigger people became more distanced from that sense of ownership. We've had to work to keep people connected. We try to do that with small groups and personal contact." To learn more, see "Fox Valley Vitality a Result of Innovation, Friendliness," at [www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol7-3-membership.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol7-3-membership.html).



## BEYOND THE WELCOME MAT

The communities our congregations serve have become more diverse in a variety of ways. Many of our congregations have a stated interest in serving the spectrum of people who now live around us. Because most of our congregations have a large white majority, such diversity—either racial or socioeconomic—will be hard to achieve without an intentional change of strategy.

### **Take A Fresh Look at Your Congregation**

The people who make up our congregations often find them so comfortable that they find it hard to step back and see what they might look like to a visitor, especially a visitor who comes from a different racial or socioeconomic background than the current membership. The Congregational Services program of the Unitarian Universalist Association has a good guide that can give you a visitor's-eye view. Check out "Conducting a Congregational Assessment," at [www.uua.org/programs/congservices/uncommon/assessment\\_instructions.html](http://www.uua.org/programs/congservices/uncommon/assessment_instructions.html) to see if this tool can give you a new perspective.

Attending to the preceding and following factors can help a congregation to grow in all of the four ways discussed earlier, and can make a congregation a vital place that attracts new people.

## **Twelve Characteristics of a Vital Congregation**

*Adapted from Kennon Callahan for Planning for Growth and Vitality Weekend Workshops*

Relational characteristics pertain to a church's connections to and among people. Functional characteristics pertain to a church's physical and fiscal traits.

### **RELATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS**

#### **1. Specific, Concrete, Mission-Oriented Objectives**

The mission-oriented church (one focused on its central purpose or mission) has two or three broad objectives that involve significant groupings of the congregation in solidarity with persons outside the walls of the church. A vital congregation does not just meet the needs of its own members but also addresses specific human hurts and hopes in the wider community.

#### **2. Connecting with, and Caring for, People**

Traditional Christian churches have had a practice of visiting both members and people in the larger community. Caring for people is a very concrete way of making the presence of the church felt.

### **3. Corporate, Dynamic Worship**

The weekly services are holistic in music and message, planned together in community, and led by a compassionate, competent team of laity and ministers. The Sunday morning experience is one of warmth and energy. The aesthetics of the sanctuary enhance both the message and the worship experience.

### **4. Significant Relational Groups**

Many people come to a local church looking for community. Mission-oriented churches are consciously and intentionally starting new caring groups in which people may discover roots, place, and belonging. In a safe community, individuals can explore more deeply for identity, meaning, and hope.

### **5. Strong Leadership Resources**

Many churches train leaders to fill functional slots inside the church's program. Mission-oriented churches nurture 50 percent of their leaders to be relational and caring with individuals and groups in the larger community. Lay leaders are complementary to the ministerial leadership, and the two work together toward clear objectives. Leaders, both lay and ministerial, focus on long-range planning and the broad objectives of the church. Attention to detail is delegated to task groups or staff.

### **6. Streamlined Structure and Solid, Participatory Decision Making**

Mission-oriented churches plan on the basis of their strengths, hopes, and objectives. They are less preoccupied with their own needs and problems than many churches. They have a streamlined organizational structure and are capable of making solid, wise decisions using democratic processes. Decisions are made by the appropriate people.

## **FUNCTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS**

### **7. Several Competent Programs and Activities**

Vital churches have two to three fully competent programs that serve, rather than use, people, because vital churches know people attract people more than programs do. Ideally, the major program is directly connected to the congregational mission and may be multidimensional, serving a range of groups and age levels.

### **8. Open Accessibility**

A vital congregation has a physical location that is accessible in terms of major traffic patterns and average trip time. Along with its physical accessibility, it has leadership that is accessible to the community. All these factors are important. Warm, friendly members and minister; open, small groups for community; and accessibility for disabled persons make a church inviting.

## 9. High Visibility

Successful churches have a high degree of geographic and “grapevine” visibility with both churched and unchurched people in the community. The physical property is easily seen, church leaders are well known in the community, and people are aware of the major programs. The church is known as a warm, welcoming, caring community that makes a difference in people’s lives.

## 10. Adequate Parking, Land, and Landscaping

There is a direct correlation between parking and attendance, worship participation, and giving. If the parking lot is full, people will get the message that the church has no more room. When parking and landscaping are inadequate, the congregation needs to develop stronger relational strategies to compensate.

## 11. Adequate Space and Facilities

Most churches limit their growth by underbuilding. Vital churches build flexible, rather than fixed, structures that feature a balance between the sanctuary, the religious education space, the hall, the office space, and the parking.

## 12. Solid Financial Resources

Successful churches have a responsible plan for stewardship, which involves financing the congregation to promote its health and support its ministry to the wider community. Financial leaders educate their members about the many ways to give, including appropriate tax advantages for each way to give.

### Which Is More Important?

#### Satisfiers and Dissatisfiers

The relational characteristics, well attended to, are the source of greatest satisfaction in a congregation.

The functional characteristics, if they are not adequately met, are the source of greatest dissatisfaction.

## Ten Recommendations for Growing a Congregation

1. Develop a consensus among all the members of your congregation that sharing Unitarian Universalism, which will result in growth, is a necessary and significant objective. Discuss growth in terms of numerical targets and demographic targets so that as many in the congregation as possible support outreach to specific groups underrepresented in the community. Without this consensus, some individuals and groups will resist the changes that result when growth becomes a major focus. Consider holding a congregational meeting to vote formally on this objective.

2. Develop a mission statement, vision, or idea for your congregation's identity and purpose. No single congregation, especially if it has less than a thousand members, can do everything. Smaller congregations in particular need to concentrate on two or three areas of congregational life that they can do well and promote to the community. Religious education for younger children, young adult programs, outreach on environmental issues, a folk music coffeehouse, and connecting with the elderly are a few examples of areas in which a congregation can identify itself and be known in the community. Go with your desires and strengths, and do what you do well without being defensive about the things you are not able to do.

3. Think and behave as if you were a little larger than you are. Many congregations decline in membership because when growth occurs, they continue thinking and behaving as if they were smaller. The reverse can also be true. When we act as if we are larger, we become larger. Thinking and behaving as if we are larger reduces the resistance to moving in that direction.

4. Be serious about developing specific objectives to accomplish in the next three years. Most middle-sized congregations from three hundred to five hundred members should have no more than four or five objectives, which can include outreach to specific underrepresented populations. Each objective should be specific enough that everyone will know when it has been reached, yet general enough to be adapted to new knowledge or changing conditions. Once the objectives have been agreed on, the committees responsible for maintaining the congregation can establish specific goals for their own areas to help meet the objectives. Opportunities for organizing task forces that require limited time commitment can be used to assimilate newcomers in one or more networks in the congregation.

5. Develop an intentional plan for greeting and following up with visitors. Few people return to a congregation after visiting once if they have not had an initial relationship with one or more individuals. Telling everyone in the congregation to be attentive to visitors rarely works. Instead, assign and train two or three individuals to undertake this responsibility. Personal follow-up after a visit is equally important. Letters are passive and impersonal; the human voice or outstretched hand is far warmer and relational.

6. Provide child care for all important meetings. Each family's being responsible for its own child care was once the norm, but young families today expect the congregation to offer this service. Congregations that wish to attract younger families need to meet these basic expectations.

7. Create an organized process for welcoming new members and helping them become a part of the community. Adapt a time line for incorporating each new member into the life of the church, beginning with the first

orientation meeting. The new-member ceremony in a Sunday service should convey the message that new members are important. Ask newcomers and new members to give impressions of their experiences with the congregation and to suggest changes that might make the congregation more attractive for other newcomers. The tendency is to share the congregation's story with newcomers, but most newcomers want to know what is planned for the future rather than hear about the past.

8. Develop a specific set of expectations for membership. The baby boomer and later generations want to know what is expected of them. Generalizations do not arouse commitment, especially in the area of financial contributions. More Unitarian Universalist congregations today clearly state that a specific percentage of income is a minimum expectation. A few congregations talk seriously about 5 percent of a member's annual income instead of gearing the canvass to members who say they "can't afford it" and not expecting too much. When the expectation is higher, so is the response.

9. Pay attention to your facilities as your congregation grows. A crowded room at coffee hour will repel those who feel uncomfortable in crowds, and after a while the congregation will be made up only of people who enjoy crowds! So, too, only children who are able to handle large Sunday school classes will return. If your congregation can't expand its facilities, you need to have two services and two religious education sessions.

10. Remember that quality is more important than any other ingredient in a growing congregation. Congregations that attempt to do too much usually end up doing nothing well. Burnout creates sloppiness, and the atmosphere feels "down." Everything should be done well if you are a congregation that wants to grow. Rehearsals for Sunday services, sound systems and working lights, facilities that are well maintained and positive looking, and newsletters that are crisp and attractive are important. Small matters that are overlooked or assumed to be unimportant can become the turnoff that your recent visitor remembers.



## Outreach and Welcoming

Unitarian Universalism is one of the religious world's best-kept secrets. Many congregations use word of mouth to spread the message about our faith. Other congregations do little to attract new people or to help those who wander in to find a home. To ensure that as many people as possible benefit from the healing messages and community that mark Unitarian Universalist congregations, as well as to ensure the inflow of fresh perspectives and energy needed to maintain a vital congregation, many congregational leaders are asking some tough questions about outreach and welcoming, including the following.

### **How easy is it to find your congregation?**

"If you build it, they will come," as the line from a movie goes. Yet if a congregation's home is hard to find and if its presence in the community is nearly invisible, potential members may never have the knowledge to make that choice. Many Unitarian Universalist congregations are an area's best-kept secret. Tucked into a forest or hidden in some other idyllic natural setting, these congregations may be less than obvious to the person seeking to find them.



### **Are you visible in the community?**

A strong public presence and public witness is perhaps the best advertising that a congregation can have. Being a voice to represent groups chronically underrepresented in the traditional leadership of a community can get a congregation on the radar for historically marginalized people and groups. Although opinions differ, it is worth thinking about advertising your congregation and your community and exploring what might make sense for you.

### **Are congregational buildings visible to passersby?**

A clear sign with service times prominently displayed can help draw in new people. A "wayside pulpit" with thought-inspiring quotes can also be attractive.



## 28 Ways That *YOU* Can Practice an Outward Orientation

—Art Brewer, *First Unitarian Congregation, Toronto, Canada*

1. Bring someone to a Sunday service.
2. Talk with someone you don't know during coffee hour.
3. Wear your name tag at every Sunday service.
4. Tell return visitors that you're glad they came back.
5. Intentionally sit beside a visitor at a Sunday service.
6. Put a UU decal on your car or home window.
7. Wear UU jewelry and clothing.
8. Use a UU coffee mug at work.
9. Practice your response to the question, "What is Unitarian Universalism?"
10. Write an article for a local newspaper about a church project in which you're involved.
11. Host a party to which you invite both members and nonmembers.
12. Participate in a community event that reflects UU principles (for example, a gay pride parade).
13. Link your favorite social justice cause to the congregation.
14. Invite a nonmember to a service, small group, or adult program within your congregation.
15. Tell a nonmember about an adult program.
16. Talk to nonmembers about your church.
17. Buy a copy of a UU sermon you liked, and give it to a nonmember.
18. Display our "7 Principles" at home or work.
19. Carry a "7 Principles" card, and give it to people when they ask about Unitarian Universalism.
20. Promote your congregation's rental space to individuals and groups you know.
21. Visit other UU congregations.
22. Give a copy of the magazine *UU World* or another UU publication to a nonmember.
23. Attend a UU church when you're on vacation.
24. Attend a cluster or district meeting.
25. Attend the UUA General Assembly in June.
26. If you subscribe to an e-mail list or an e-group, send a posting that identifies an upcoming sermon or event at church that would be of interest to other subscribers.
27. Let nonmembers know about the wonderful religious education programs you have for children and adults.
28. Tell someone about a provocative thought you heard at church.

### **To Advertise or Not to Advertise**

Many congregations have invested in advertising—often one of the most dollar-intensive forms of outreach—only to grow frustrated at the lack of immediate results. The paradox about advertising is that it might not yield the direct or immediate results you want and yet may be an important way to reinforce the presence of your congregation in the community. For more information on effective ways to use and think about advertising, see “Getting Results from Ads Takes Time and Patience,” at [www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol1-4-membership.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol1-4-membership.html).

The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes in Chocorua, New Hampshire, found that advertising helped them reach people across a large service area that includes twenty towns and villages in eastern New Hampshire and western Maine. An aggressive outreach campaign begun in 2001 involved quarterly advertisements in the local paper, along with four to six radio spots a day. In a single year, their membership grew from forty members to sixty, which enabled them to hire a half-time minister and develop an active religious education program. JoAnn Rainville, a member of the congregation, advises that congregations test the advertising waters for themselves before deciding whether or not advertising will work for them. To learn more about this congregation, visit [www.uufes.org](http://www.uufes.org).

### **Is the Web site up-to-date?**



Having a Web site is a given in this day and age, but an untended Web site can be simply an exercise in frustration to a would-be visitor. Web sites should display service times and current information on service topics in an easily navigable format, as well as full contact information and directions to the services. Posting clear directions from multiple locations on the congregation's Web site is ideal—especially if those directions have been

checked for inaccuracies! Some congregations have a Web site within a Web site, with the main Web site accessible to all Web users and oriented to visitors. The Web site within the Web site, then, is geared more toward members and friends and is accessible by a password. The latter site enables members of the congregation to share more personal news in a safe way.

### **Church for Those Who Don't "Do" Church**

"A way to alleviate the awkwardness of 'selling church to friends' is to have special services. We have musical services twice a year, which are basically high-quality one-hour concerts," notes Kiersten Dart, membership chair of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, Hillsborough, North Carolina which has seventy members. "On April Fools Day, we have our annual joke service, which isn't too different from going to a comedy club. During these services, we note how music and laughter adds to our spirituality, but mostly, we gather on these days for fun. Inviting a friend to one of these services (especially a friend that isn't 'churchy') is very easy because you aren't pushing a religion but truly sharing your excitement over an upcoming event . . . and a free one at that! Once they are there, they get a sense of the community and hopefully leave with a brochure or two. If they sign the guest book, you can send them newsletters, etc."

The congregation also has a strong emphasis on social action and lists the organizations it works with on the top level of its Web site. To learn more, go to [www.rtpnet.org/~uuch/](http://www.rtpnet.org/~uuch/).

### **How easy is it to park once you get there?**

Many of our congregations are located in places where parking is hard to come by. Over time, this can prove to be a deterrent to even seasoned members and friends. Newcomers and first-time visitors can find a lack of on-site parking especially daunting, so many congregations reserve a number of spaces for visitors. Many congregations reserve parking for visitors as a way of making it clear they are welcome.

### **What do people see and encounter when they step through the doors?**

Getting people in the door is the first step. Now you have to stop and ask, What do people see when they enter our congregation? First impressions count, and so do the messages you communicate by the art on your walls, the cleanliness or messiness of your space, and the ease with which people can find their way around.

### **The Devil Is in the Details**

Making a good first impression means paying attention to the details of how your congregation's home is presented. For example, the images you present on your walls and other materials send an implicit message as to who is welcome and who is not—a message that will be particularly noted by people of color and individuals with disabilities. For more information, see "To Attract More Visitors, Start with the Bathroom," at [www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol1-3-membership.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol1-3-membership.html).

### **Who do people meet when they step through the doors?**

The first contact that visitors have with someone from your congregation may be a big determinant of whether they feel welcomed or not. Congregations have different "cultures," and what works in the greeters' program differs from congregation to congregation. One important step is realizing that in most congregations, greeting cannot just happen. Greeting must be seen as a *true ministry of the congregation*, and greeters must be people who understand how to relate to people from many backgrounds and generations.

### **Can people find a seat when they get there?**

Growing congregations find that a lack of space can be a true barrier to further growth and can actually cause numbers to drop. Congregations facing this issue may need to look at building or expanding to two services. An excellent resource when considering these critical decisions are the Planning for Growth and Vitality Weekend Workshops sponsored by Congregational Services of the Unitarian Universalist Association. The resource may be accessed at [www.uua.org/cde/education/weekends.html](http://www.uua.org/cde/education/weekends.html).



### **Should We Add a Service?**

Which congregations are good candidates for multiple services? Charles Arn, in his research on North American Protestant churches, found that eight out of ten churches that add a new service will experience a measurable increase in total worship attendance and total giving. If you believe that going to an additional service is in keeping with your mission and ministry, then you need to look at the number and types of worship opportunities you are providing and consider providing more.

When adding a new worship opportunity, make one change in the orientation of the service. If you succeed in serving one additional subgroup in the population, you are succeeding in expanding your ministry effectively. Arn describes differences in population groups the services might address:

- Generational differences and the values they embrace.
- Differences represented by "believers" and "seekers."
- Cultural focus differences, such as multiple cultures or a different culture than the dominant group in the congregation.

Congregations considering an additional service should read the resource document entitled *Adding Worship Services: A How-To Manual*, available from Congregational Services by mail or on the Web at [www.uua.org/cde/education/addingworshipservices.pdf](http://www.uua.org/cde/education/addingworshipservices.pdf).



Arn, Charles. ***How to Start a New Service: Your Church Can Reach New People.*** Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books. 1997.

***National Congregations Study***, by Charles Arn  
<http://www.alban.org/NatCongStudy.asp>

### **Greeting Newcomers Takes More Than a Friendly Face**

So your congregation has designated greeters or is considering setting up a greeters program. Congratulations! This approach will work even better if all members have a practice of being welcoming. And it also pays to think about those members whose personal gifts make them the ideal greeters—or even supergreeters. If you lack those folks, then a good training program can help you get the most out of your greeting efforts. To read more about supergreeters, see [www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol6-3-membership.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol6-3-membership.html). To read about how to get a congregation to be welcoming to all, see [www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol1-1-membership.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol1-1-membership.html). And for information about training your greeters, see [www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol3-1-membership.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol3-1-membership.html).

### **Pamphlets: Another Tool to Help Us Tell Our Story**

Unitarian Universalists and would-be Unitarian Universalists like information, and many first-time visitors appreciate being given information that they can read later on their own. You may want to put together material specific to your congregation and to stock up on the materials available through our association. (For more ideas on gifts for visitors, see [www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol3-5-membership.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol3-5-membership.html), and for more information on marketing materials developed by the Unitarian Universalist Association for use in local media markets, see [www.uua.org/programs/congservices/uncommon/](http://www.uua.org/programs/congservices/uncommon/)).

### **Overcoming Obstacles to Growth**

Perhaps your congregation lacks parking or space for a religious education program, or it has some other hindrance that makes it hard to welcome new members. Although real, such obstacles do not need to preclude growth; they simply require a more intentional approach to overcome them. For more information on the First Parish at Brewster, Brewster, Massachusetts and how this congregation has worked to be welcoming, see “Church on Cape Cod Thrives by Looking Inward, Outward,” available at [www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol5-3-membership.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol5-3-membership.html).

**To Build or Not to Build**

Space constraints can be an insurmountable barrier to growth. Congregations whose space cannot accommodate visitors must reexamine whether they need to build. Undertaking to build a new facility is one of the most demanding decisions a congregation can make, yet waiting too long can seriously undermine growth. For more on building, see the Unitarian Universalist Association's Office of Congregational Fundraising Services at [www.uua.org/cde/fundraising/](http://www.uua.org/cde/fundraising/).

**Outreach to Particular Populations**

Congregations tend to take on a particular "flavor" or "culture," and Unitarian Universalist congregations are no exception. A theological bent of the founding members or the majority of more seasoned members might dictate this culture. In short, each Unitarian Universalist congregation puts its own stamp on liberal religion, and this tendency is part of the richness of our tradition. First and foremost, a potential member must be interested in what our particular form of liberal religion offers. Yet sometimes a congregational culture can informally dictate who becomes a member and can cull folks from the pool of would-be Unitarian Universalists. People who are especially drawn by our message of radical inclusiveness, by our belief in the possibility for human achievement in this world, and by our commitment to social justice may be disappointed that a particular congregational culture seems exclusive rather than inviting. In these cases, frank acknowledgments of strengths and weaknesses and a commitment on the part of leaders to approach things differently can expand the reach of a congregation and the fertile diversity of the mix as well. For more information on congregational culture, see Jefferson Unitarian Church's Web site at [www.jeffersonunitarian.org/programs/volunteers/pdf/1aChurchCulture.pdf](http://www.jeffersonunitarian.org/programs/volunteers/pdf/1aChurchCulture.pdf).

**LESBIANS AND BISEXUAL, GAY, AND TRANSGENDER PEOPLE**

At a time when other religious groups are working against the rights of individuals with sexual orientation differences, affectional differences, or both, our Unitarian Universalist congregations offer a sanctuary and a solace to those who seek a religious home. Unitarian Universalism has been on record as supporting the rights of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals since 1970. The Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, Transgender Concerns was formed in 1973. We have advocated against sodomy laws and job and housing discrimination. We have advocated for ceremonies of union and same-gender marriage, the right to serve in the military, the right to lead congregations as ministers and religious professionals, and the right to be parents. We are now on record as supporting the rights of transgender people. Yet many congregations need to work at

ensuring that they are as welcoming as they can be. For resources on these matters, go to [www.uua.org/obgltc/](http://www.uua.org/obgltc/).

### **PEOPLE OF COLOR**

A truism states that Sunday morning is the most segregated time in this country. Many Unitarian Universalists lament the lack of racial diversity in the seats around them each week and yet are unaware of the many cultural biases built into the way they “do church.” Awareness can be built by participating in discussions involved with antiracism work. For information on antiracism programming, see [www.uua.org/programs/justice/antiracism/](http://www.uua.org/programs/justice/antiracism/). A congregation that already has a group working on racial justice issues should invite the group to consult on membership practices. Also see information on the JUUST Change Anti-Oppression Consultancy and Resources on the Web at [www.uua.org/programs/justice/antiracism/consultancy.html](http://www.uua.org/programs/justice/antiracism/consultancy.html).

### **PEOPLE OF LOW INCOME/LOW EDUCATIONAL LEVELS**

Many Unitarian Universalist congregations are tied to university communities, and many of our members are highly educated. Yet you do not have to have a degree to be a seeker or a questioner or to be drawn to the freedom, reason, and tolerance of Unitarian Universalism. Once again, congregations need to examine assumptions and practices with an eye to embracing a broader spectrum of the population.

### **YOUNG ADULTS**

Many adolescents—including those in liberal religions—turn away from the faith of their parents. Young adults can find what happens on most Sundays antithetical to their way of being in the world. An alternative format such as the Soulful Sundown model has been successfully used in many congregations to help young adults feel welcomed and supported in their personal religious journeys. In addition to Soulful Sundown, there are many other successful young adult programs to choose from. A congregational culture that supports young adults in taking leadership across a wide range of activities can also be effective. For more information see the “Young Adults Need Special Attention to Feel at Home” section on page 22.



### **Young Adults Need Special Attention to Feel at Home**

Young adults inhabit a very different world from that of their parents, and they often find that they need something different in their religious community as well. Congregations need young adults as part of the spectrum of a vibrant religious body, and many young adults need Unitarian Universalist communities to support them. Congregations without a young adult presence can take steps to attract them, and these steps will benefit not only young adults but the entire community. For more information on specific ideas about how to connect young adults to your congregation, see [www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol4-3-membership.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol4-3-membership.html) and [www.uua.org/ya-cm/](http://www.uua.org/ya-cm/). To find out more about the Soulful Sundown approach to “inspiration and not conversion,” see an introductory article at [www.uua.org/cde/largechurch2001/lavanhar.html](http://www.uua.org/cde/largechurch2001/lavanhar.html) and the program’s own site at [www.soulfulsundown.org/](http://www.soulfulsundown.org/).

### **PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

People with disabilities can find life to be a constant challenge as they navigate a world that often does not accommodate their needs. Unfortunately, these challenges often continue on Sunday mornings as well, and thus our congregations are denied the many contributions that adults and children with disabilities could make to our communities. For more thoughts on specific ways to make your congregation more accessible, see [www.uua.org/programs/justice/accessibility/](http://www.uua.org/programs/justice/accessibility/).

### **Accessibility Starts with Small Steps**

Too often we decide that our congregations do not need to be accessible because we do not have any disabled people. Yet this can be a self-fulfilling prophecy if our buildings are not accessible and if we do not visibly show our commitment to assisting people with disabilities. Cost is often a concern, especially for congregations with older buildings, yet we fail to take the small steps we could to address at least some of the needs. To learn more about getting started on making your physical plant and programs more accessible, see “Accessibility Often Grows from a Small First Step,” at [www.uua.org/interconnections/nourishing/vol1-4-nourishing.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/nourishing/vol1-4-nourishing.html).

## **Primary Responsibility for Outreach: The Membership Committee?**

One of the most important committees in a congregation is the membership committee. In a sense, every member of the congregation is part of the membership committee, as it is the role of each member to be open to, and to welcome, visitors. In fact, a small congregation needs a membership committee of 3 to 4 hard-working members, and a congregation of 150 or more needs 5 to 7 members on its committee. The size of the committee also depends on its responsibilities.

Although the charge of the membership committee varies from one congregation to another, the committee is usually responsible for contacting potential new members, welcoming newcomers, and recognizing and helping to integrate new members into the life of the congregation. The committee works closely with the publicity and hospitality committees, as well as with the minister in congregations that have one.

The typical membership committee's job is to do the following:

- Be well versed in the principles of Unitarian Universalism and the nature of the local congregation, its programs, and its emphasis, as well as be able to formulate reasons for people to join.
- Ensure a coordinated welcome for newcomers, help them get acquainted, and follow up with visitors.
- Survey the community to discover areas (geographic, demographic, economic, social, and political) in which potential new members might be found.
- Search out potential new members and be comfortable working across people's differences so that new members can reflect the demographics of the community.
- Develop a means of approaching nonchurch-affiliated persons who might find a focus and association in the Unitarian Universalist religion.
- Plan programs of orientation for individuals new to Unitarian Universalism or to a particular congregation.
- Plan, with the minister and the congregation president or worship committee, for suitable recognition of new members.
- Help keep the membership roll current, and maintain contact with persons whose participation may be waning.

### **InfoMaps Demographic Research**

Percept Group, Inc., available through the UUA

The UUA has contracted with a demographic research company called Percept Group, Inc., to get congregations a discounted rate on a demographic study package. Included is (1) information in tabular form based on the most recent census for the study area or areas you have chosen for your ministry area, (2) trends and projections for the study area or areas, (3) U.S. lifestyle data, and (4) a guide to help you use this information. Also, you will receive six graphic representations of these data in the six InfoMaps you select. Examples of demographic information are Lifestyle Diversity, Median Age, Five-Year Growth, Percentage of 2000 College Graduates, and Number of Unitarian Universalists. Please see the UUA Web site at [www.uua.org/cde/education/demographic.html](http://www.uua.org/cde/education/demographic.html), and click on the link to request ordering information.

Members of the committee should be personable, outgoing, articulate, and enthusiastic Unitarian Universalists. A good balance of age, gender, and race helps the committee be more effective in working with a variety of newcomers. It is also valuable to have at least one brand-new member on the committee, as well as longer-term members.

The ways in which a membership committee carries out its responsibilities also vary from congregation to congregation. Generally, the committee members discover newcomers, greet them, and introduce them to members who can be counted on to help them get acquainted and answer their questions with friendly intelligence. The committee may be responsible for maintaining a rack of pamphlets about Unitarian Universalism and preparing an attractive brochure about the local congregation to be added to the pamphlet rack. The committee selects a way to follow up with visitors—a personal note, a telephone call, or a special invitation to a congregational event—and see that their names are added to the mailing list if they wish to receive the congregation's newsletter.

Several times a year, or more often for large or rapidly growing congregations, the membership committee should sponsor an orientation for newcomers who wish to know more about Unitarian Universalism and the local congregation. These sessions should be carefully planned to involve newcomers and longer-term members in sharing personal religious views; exploring together the liberal religious heritage; gaining an understanding of the values, rather than the theology, that generally connect Unitarian Universalists to one another; and explaining the programs and organizational structure of the local congregation. In addition, as the personal interests, needs, and skills of newcomers become known, the membership

committee sees that they are invited to social events, special programs, interest groups, work parties, or committee meetings.

Some newcomers soon indicate an interest in becoming members. Others wait for an invitation. The membership committee should be ready to explain what is involved in joining when newcomers ask and should extend the invitation, when the time seems right, to newcomers who do not ask. Although we do not want to pressure people to join, some people who attend fairly regularly have never become members because it was never suggested to them.

**All the Documents Needed for a Membership Committee**

Congregations seeking to begin or revise membership committee procedures will find a draft of all the basic documents needed at [www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/allthedocs.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/allthedocs.html).

Although these documents may benefit from being tailored to your congregation's needs, this is a great place to start.

**Unitarian Universalist Metro Atlanta North Outlines Responsibilities of Membership**

Unitarian Universalist Metro Atlanta North (UUMAN) makes the responsibilities of membership clear to those interested in joining this dynamic congregation. They have developed a pamphlet on membership, which includes this statement on "Responsibilities of Membership."

The responsibility of membership is that we ask you to become involved in the church in some way that is meaningful for you. We ask three things: 1) that you find a small group here that feeds your soul, 2) that you join in the work of a committee (many hands make quick work), and 3) that you support the church as you are able with your financial gifts. In order to help you fulfill the first two items, the Membership Committee is asking new members to participate on the Greeting Team for a 3 to 4 month period (until the next New Member Ceremony) after joining the Church. New members will work alongside experienced greeters during their integration period one Sunday each month. By bringing their perspectives as newcomers, new members will provide a service that offers mentorship to those even newer to UUMAN. We also hope that in the process of helping visitors find their way into our faith community, new members will have the opportunity to explore and discover the many opportunities for growth at our church.

For information on UUMAN, visit [www.uuman.org/](http://www.uuman.org/).

## DEEPENING THE CONNECTIONS

People who have visited a congregation several times and become “regulars”—or at least semiregular attendees on Sundays or at regularly offered midweek programming—may begin to need a little more information and contact. Many of the people who come in our doors are unchurched, either because they were raised that way or because they have rejected their childhood religion. They often have many questions about how this Unitarian Universalist congregation they are now attending is run and what its message is. They may find answers to some of their questions by meeting with a leader or the minister, or simply through coffee hour conversations. Some repeat visitors require more focus and attention.

In addition, those who have visited multiple times may begin to desire personal connections within the community and yet not know where to start. At this stage, they need to receive clear information that allows them to continue their exploration and seek meaningful connections and a deepened relationship with the congregation.

### Exploration

Experience shows that people who do not connect to your congregation outside of attending worship services may not create ties deep enough to sustain the responsibilities of membership. Providing a range of opportunities for people to experience the richness of congregational life is essential to expanding membership in a manner that will be sustainable.

Adult religious education classes can be an excellent way for newcomers to learn more, as can other small groups such as covenant groups. (Small group ministry information for Unitarian Universalists can be found at [www.uua.org/cde/sgm/index.html](http://www.uua.org/cde/sgm/index.html)). Special holiday celebrations or social events can be a good time to make connections, and committee work (with some important caveats below) can help people feel connected and valued. Repeat visitors should be encouraged to seek connections in addition to regular attendance at worship, because it is only through experiencing the richness of the community that they can truly benefit from it.

Groups that assist people with life's transitions can also help meet people where they are. Research by the Unitarian Universalist Association shows that many of those who become members of Unitarian Universalist congregations do so when they are in transition. Among those who have chosen to join Unitarian Universalist congregations, 52 percent have moved, 38 percent have experienced a life transition or crisis, and 10 percent have married or acquired a new partner.

### **Pathways Offers Newcomers' Programs**

Pathways, a new congregation forming in the Dallas, Texas, area has looked at the best ideas about newcomer assimilation within Unitarian Universalist congregations, as well as other denominational models. Newcomers at Pathways can choose from several options, including the following:

- Exploration Group: Exploration Groups meet weekly to start building relationships and to begin exploring "big questions" about spirituality, ethics, and life issues.
- Newcomer's Lunch: Newcomers are invited to join a member of the Pathways staff for lunch after Sunday services. It's an opportunity to learn more about Pathways and determine if it's the right place for the individual. It's also a great way to start building relationships with other people.
- Pathfinders Class: Pathfinders Class is a two-session introduction to Pathways, emphasizing three building blocks of membership: small groups, service, and stewardship. It's a wonderful opportunity to connect with other people, reflect on important life issues, and get a more thorough introduction to the church. At the conclusion of Pathfinders, participants will be invited to membership in Pathways.
- Heritage Class: Heritage Class introduces people to our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition. Participants will learn a little about our history, famous Unitarian Universalists, and the shape of things today.

For more on the Pathways approach, see [www.pathwaysuu.org/newcomer.htm](http://www.pathwaysuu.org/newcomer.htm).



Most Unitarian Universalist congregations have a wealth of programming that can provide excellent opportunities for repeat visitors to “try on” what it would mean to make a commitment to the congregation. And certainly opportunities for committee work and service abound. Sometimes, though, the groups sponsoring these activities become more like exclusive clubs that serve a fixed membership and rarely welcome new people and the energy and enthusiasm they would bring. If you are wondering if your programs are open to new people, consider some of these questions:

- Does your congregation publish a guide to its groups and activities that can be handed to newcomers? Do you hold an activities fair annually?
- Do you have multiple ways to get the word out about upcoming events and opportunities (such as newsletters, bulletin boards, pulpit or bulletin announcements, e-mail lists, and Web pages)? Do you place updated announcements on your Web page to attract new people, as well as to inform existing members?
- Do committees and groups publish meeting times on a master calendar or other open forum? Are meetings held at people’s houses or on the congregation’s property (which may be less threatening to newcomers)? If events are held off-site, are clear directions provided to attendees?
- Do newcomers or new members receive an interest survey or other means of indicating how they would like to connect first? Is someone (member or staff) responsible for following up with these surveys, or do they sit in a drawer somewhere?
- Do membership committee members, greeters, ministers, or other key leaders pass on word of newcomers’ interests and talents?
- Is safe and stimulating child care provided for adult education classes or other key congregational events?
- Are newcomers invited to “try on” committee work with the understanding that they are there to learn and experience rather than simply to fill a slot that existing members are not willing to take? Are new committee members mentored, formally or informally, by more experienced members?
- Does your congregation offer programming designed to help newcomers who are ready to explore whether membership might be right for them?



## **Twenty Suggestions for Adult Programming**

(From *Churchworks: A Well-Body Book for Congregations*, by Anne Odin Heller, Boston: Skinner House Books, 1999.)

1. Country and western line dancing.
2. Dreams and the meaning of dreaming.
3. Parents' group meeting weekly for stay-at-home parents. Bring kids or not.
4. Weekend fishing trip for men only (ages 13 to 100).
5. Women's ski trip.
6. Wills and planned giving seminar.
7. Healing service or affirmation circles.
8. Artistic bookmaking; make journals, then start a journal group.
9. Writer's workshop (poetry, prose, or fiction).
10. Monthly movies (the host chooses the movie), coffee or discussion following the film. Make popcorn.
11. Zen meditation at 8:30 Sunday mornings.
12. River rafting for "chickens."
13. Uprooting racism for white people.
14. Telling Our Stories groups.
15. Owing Your Religious Past class.
16. A roots study group, in which everyone talks about their ethnic origins.
17. Make a Joyful Noise: singing for nonsingers—learn hymns.
18. An annual congregational camp. If you are a small congregation, invite a neighboring congregation to join you.
19. Earth-based spirituality seminar.
20. Exploring Unitarian Universalist history class.



### **Listening and Hearing Make Groups More Welcoming**

(Adapted from Anne Odin Heller, *Churchworks: A Well-Body Book for Congregations*, Boston: Skinner House Books, 1999.)

Many newcomers attempt to join a committee and then find that the internal culture of the group is almost impossible for them to penetrate. Group guidelines, such as these suggestions from Anne Heller, provide a good framework to help ensure that all group members will be supported by the group, mutually respected, and their hopes fulfilled:

- Agree to begin and end on time so people won't feel pressed.
- Ensure that everyone has a chance to speak once before anyone speaks twice.
- Alternate pro and con speakers on any given issue. Have someone record, on butcher paper on the wall, what is being said. That way a group memory is clearly documented, and everyone can agree that it accurately reflects what was said.
- Try not to speak in code—don't assume everyone knows everything.
- Take breaks at long meetings.
- Have job descriptions for the committee and members, and share them with new members.
- Have timed agendas, and stick to them.
- Know what you would like to happen so that the group feels trust in the group process. What will happen if trust breaks down?

### **Pathway to Membership**

People entering Unitarian Universalist congregations come with different time lines and comfort levels about when it is time to explore the possibility of becoming a member. Some might feel ready after a few visits. Others may literally remain a “friend” or a “pledging friend” for decades. The congregation should ensure that at whatever time is right for an individual, the path to membership is clear and the responsibilities of membership are explicit.

#### **Jefferson Unitarian Church Offers Path to Membership**

One congregation that has developed a clear path for visitors wishing to explore membership is Jefferson Unitarian Church in Golden, Colorado. Their membership development program and materials provide a good starting point for congregations starting or revamping their approach to membership development. For specific documents and more on the Jefferson Unitarian Church's approach to membership development, see [www.jeffersonunitarian.org/programs/prg\\_volunteer.html](http://www.jeffersonunitarian.org/programs/prg_volunteer.html).

Becoming a member of a Unitarian Universalist congregation is a commitment, and the responsibilities of that commitment should be clear. Requirements vary from congregation to congregation, and potential new members need to understand the particular expectations of your congregation. Some congregations require a “financial contribution of record” or a written commitment to pledge as a condition of membership, whereas others simply ask that a person feel in sympathy with the purpose and is ready to sign the membership book. Although all Unitarian Universalist congregations are noncreedal and do not require people to profess a particular creed, some emphasize their mission and want new members to be comfortable with it as a statement of the values of the congregation. Some congregations also have special membership designations, such as “emeritus members,” that recognize long-time contributors who are no longer in a position to provide financial support. Whatever the particulars of membership in your congregation, making expectations clear is vital to retaining new members and avoiding awkward misunderstandings.

## **Membership Briefings**

Some congregations offer would-be members the opportunity to meet with key leaders or with a minister at a particular time. Some offer these meetings at a repeating time, such as after services on the first Sunday of each month. Other congregations offer a form that allows a member or staff person to contact people who have expressed an interest in membership and help them get more information on how to join.

## **Membership Classes**

Membership classes are another way in which many Unitarian Universalist congregations help potential members explore whether membership is right for them at a particular time. Classes can provide potential members with a chance to learn about Unitarian Universalism, about the responsibilities of membership, and about the specifics of how the congregation is governed and operated.

In addition, membership classes can create a group of newcomers who come to know one another, along with a few longer-serving members. Class members mean a great deal to one another through having discussed things they hold dear—sacred things—with one another in a trusting group setting. This situation can create cohorts that feel a warmth among them akin to, say, the “class of 05,” yet with a deeper connection than most high school classes ever embody.

Each congregation will want to put its own stamp on any classes offered. Good models exist, though, such as the Path to Membership class developed by the Jefferson Unitarian Church in Golden, Colorado. Find out more about this at [www.jeffersonunitarian.org/programs/volunteers/documentation.html](http://www.jeffersonunitarian.org/programs/volunteers/documentation.html). Scroll down the page to item 3 about the class, and also on the same Web page see the rest of the outlined program for new member incorporation.

Here are a few questions you may want to consider in designing or redesigning your congregation's membership class:

- What should the class format be? Because most potential members and their families are so busy these days, a number of congregations are experimenting with alternative ways of providing a membership class, such as a one-time, all-Saturday format. Other congregations offer the class multiple times during the year, with the class meeting a different day of the week each time it is offered to assist those who may have ongoing obligations on a certain day.
- Who should lead the class? Classes can be offered by experienced members or ministers. Showcasing a variety of leaders, both professional and volunteer, in a class can also be helpful when one person or the membership committee facilitates the flow. The more faces a potential member gets to see, the more that person will feel welcomed, informed, and connected.
- How can the class content be interactive? The more interactive the format, the more engaged potential members will be in their decision about membership. An interactive format also allows the class leaders to get to know the class participants and identify their gifts and skills.
- How can the class be made accessible? Classes should be physically accessible, offer the option of child care, and also be offered at times that accommodate a variety of schedules.
- How will follow-up be done? Individuals who choose to become members after taking a membership class will, with planning, be incorporated into the process of new member assimilation. Yet often potential members take a membership class and decide they are not ready to join at this point. The membership committee should be sure to keep a running list of these individuals for future follow-up so they won't fall through the cracks.

Your congregation may also find that "one size does not fit all" and may decide to offer a variety of membership classes. Some congregations also offer different classes for people who are brand-new and those who have experience, either as a long-term friend or as a member of another Unitarian Universalist congregation.

### **Putting Heart and Soul into Membership Classes**

A successful membership class will meet potential members where they are, as will other efforts designed to help visitors discern if membership is right for them. Each congregation will approach these activities in its own way and must tailor efforts to fit the particular culture of its membership. For an example of the membership efforts of First Unitarian Church, Dallas, Texas, All Souls Unitarian Church, Tulsa, Oklahoma, and others, see [www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol3-4-membership.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol3-4-membership.html).

## Small Group Ministry

Another way for people to get involved is to have them experience the caring and intellectual rigor of a small group within your congregation. Many congregations allow nonmembers to participate in covenant groups or other small groups that meet to reflect and learn together using a set format. Small group ministry can take a number of forms and is a good tool to deepen relationships among existing members, as well as new members.

### **Covenant Groups: What Are They?**

(Excerpted from the Reverend Bob Hill's writings on covenant groups.)

**What are covenant groups?** Covenant groups have the following five characteristics:

1. **SIZE**—The ideal is for each group to have about 10 people, and covenant groups should never have more than 14 members.
2. **FREQUENCY OF MEETING**—At least once a month.
3. **FORMAT**—Covenant groups begin with centering, followed by a check-in. When each person has had a chance to speak briefly about her or his day, week, or situation in life at the moment, the business or function of the group begins. A few minutes before closing time, each person is asked to say, in a word or phrase, how he or she is feeling as the meeting closes. Then there is a brief closing.
4. **LEADERSHIP**— Each covenant group is led by a person chosen and trained by the minister of the sponsoring church.
5. **TWO COVENANTS**—With the help of the leader, each group must define how the members intend to relate to one another and how they, as a group, will serve their church.

The five characteristics in the “Covenant Groups: What Are They?” box are the bare-bones requirements for a covenant group. Most churches have small groups, but a small group is not a covenant group unless it has these five characteristics. The magic in covenant groups depends on all five points.

In Brewster, Massachusetts, the Reverend James Robinson used small-group organization of this sort since 1982, and his church grew sevenfold, to nearly a thousand adults and children. One in every twenty people in the area are now Unitarian Universalist.

Small-group organization works magic because carefully led small groups meet two fundamental human needs:

1. People come to our churches to be lifted out of the ordinary, to be drawn up from the mundane, and to seek relief (preferably in an interactive way) from the omnipresent materialism of our culture.
2. People living in our society of frequent relocations and diminished family support come to our churches to find friends and community—"a place where everybody knows your name."

Covenant groups provide for both those needs in ways that our Sunday services, coffee hours, committee meetings, Dinners for Eight, and other gatherings cannot. Proof that the organizational model most of us are currently using does not meet these needs well is in our statistics.

We've been doing church the same basic way for 150 years and more. The result? According to an analysis by campaign consultant Jerry King, Unitarian Universalists in the United States and Canada account for 1 person out of every 1,881 in the population. The ratio is significantly worse now than it was at merger in 1961. On our own continent, we are outnumbered by Sikhs. It doesn't have to be so. Remember Brewster's ratio of one in twenty?

For more information about covenant groups, go to [www.swuuc.org/Bob%20Hill/Bob%20Hill's%20Page.htm](http://www.swuuc.org/Bob%20Hill/Bob%20Hill's%20Page.htm) or [www.the-ccv.org/](http://www.the-ccv.org/). For specific information about young adult covenant groups, see [www.uua.org/ya-cm/resources/covenantgroup.html](http://www.uua.org/ya-cm/resources/covenantgroup.html).



## JOINING THE CONGREGATION

One of the many questions that start debate in Unitarian Universalist congregations is how easy or hard it should be to join the congregation. Many seasoned congregation watchers have come to believe that a meaningful membership process is essential to ensuring that the decision to become a member is an actual expression of a new level of commitment.

### **Membership: The *Big Picture***

Individuals interested in understanding the history of membership as we now practice it in our autonomous Unitarian Universalist congregations might enjoy reading a report by the Unitarian Universalist Association's Commission on Appraisal, which looked at the state of Unitarian Universalist membership in its report *Belonging: The Meaning of Membership*. This report also provides helpful background for more seasoned leaders seeking to articulate a clear sense of what membership means. The full report is available at [www.uua.org/coa/reports\\_issued.html](http://www.uua.org/coa/reports_issued.html).

### **The Big Step: Joining**

The decision to join a congregation should be a meaningful one, both for the individual making that commitment and the congregation to which the commitment is being made. As new members get more involved in the life of a congregation, they should be offered ample opportunities to grow in their faith and commitment to the congregation and to the Unitarian Universalist Association.

If the path from visitor to member is explicit and clear in the manner that has been laid out in previous sections, then the decision to join should be an informed choice.

The privileges of membership should be outlined in your congregation's bylaws. (For samples, see "Membership Requirements" in "Your Congregation's Bylaws: A Guide to Effective Writing and Revising," at [www.uua.org/cde/education/congbylaws/membership-req.html](http://www.uua.org/cde/education/congbylaws/membership-req.html).) In addition, supporting policy documents for the congregation may spell out additional privileges, such as the ability to use the services of the minister or physical facilities without charge, or the right to chair committees. The membership committee can compile these into a helpful brochure for prospective and new members.



### **Membership Categories**

Some congregations have different categories of membership, with the specific rights and responsibilities of each category spelled out in the bylaws. Associate, honorary, and emeritus members are three examples of different types of membership. For examples of different types of membership and their associated rights and privileges, see “Additional Examples of Membership Categories” in “Your Congregation’s Bylaws: A Guide to Effective Writing and Revising,” at [www.uua.org/cde/education/congbylaws/membership-categories-examples.html](http://www.uua.org/cde/education/congbylaws/membership-categories-examples.html).

### **Recognition of New Members**

Many congregations have ceremonies that allow the commitment that is membership to be recognized in a ritualized and public way. The most common method is to have a brief ceremony as part of the regularly scheduled Sunday worship services. Additional elements can include signing the membership book (either as part of that ceremony or before the service with the minister and key congregational leaders) and recognition through symbolic gifts such as a flower, chalice lapel pin, or other small token.

Ceremonies mark the important passages of our lives, and we remember them long after they've passed—if they are done well. Joining a Unitarian Universalist congregation should be one of those moments to remember, whether it's done with a simple but meaningful signing ceremony or with a flourish of pageantry. For those of you who have wondered how other congregations do it, or whether you could spark up your own ceremony, see “Create Memorable Moments to Welcome New Members,” at [www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol1-2-membership.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol1-2-membership.html).

### **Membership Kit Steers Folks to Membership**

First Unitarian in Portland, Oregon, uses a Web site and other materials to help potential members understand the path to membership. Leaders have put all the required forms, including a pledge card, information sheet, handout on rights and responsibilities of membership, and interest survey together in a downloadable “Membership Kit,” which is accessed through the “Newcomers” link of their Web site. To learn more, go to [www.firstunitarianportland.org/publications/EnrollmentKit.pdf](http://www.firstunitarianportland.org/publications/EnrollmentKit.pdf).

### **Coming of Age Programs Are Path to Youth Membership**

A number of congregations allow youth to join as full voting members of the congregation after they complete a “coming of age” program that helps them understand what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist and what it means to be a congregational member. Such programs typically have four parts, including pairing of youth with adult mentors, discussions and retreats that emphasize self-awareness and confidence building, service to the congregation and community, and a culminating affirmation ceremony. For information, see “Coming of Age Programs Include Rewards for All,” at [www.uua.org/interconnections/nourishing/vol2-4-nourishing.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/nourishing/vol2-4-nourishing.html).

### **Bridging Ceremonies Mark Young Adulthood**

The transition from youth to young adult in a Unitarian Universalist congregation is one fraught with opportunities for relationships to end. When high school youth leave your congregation for college, jobs, the military, or other endeavors, does anyone other than their parents notice? An increasing number of congregations are marking the transition from the teen years to young adulthood with bridging ceremonies.

A bridging ceremony is a congregational service, generally held in the spring, that is devoted to recognizing, honoring, and celebrating the youth who have, in many cases, been in your religious education program for many years and now are moving on. Jesse Jaeger didn't have the benefit of a bridging ceremony when he departed his home congregation at the end of high school. "When I left the church and went to college I sort of fell off the face of Unitarian Universalism for three years," said Jaeger, youth programs director for the Unitarian Universalist Association. "There wasn't a whole lot of support. I could have attended a small fellowship during college, but I didn't quite know how to find one." For more information on bridging ceremonies, see “Bridging Ceremonies Mark Young Adulthood Passage,” at [www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol5-4-membership.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol5-4-membership.html), and see [www.uua.org/ya-cm/congregations/bridgingyouth.html](http://www.uua.org/ya-cm/congregations/bridgingyouth.html).

### **Life after Signing the Book**

Joining a congregation does not mean instant understanding, comfort, or connection, and new members need to be assimilated into the life of the congregation. If members do not find connections beyond Sunday morning, they are likely to fade away and become inactive. Too often membership committees focus solely on shepherding people up to the point of joining, leaving new members on their own to figure out how to move to the next level of involvement.

Adult religious education classes and small groups such as covenant or affinity groups provide a smaller and supportive environment for new members to get to know a few other people in the congregation. Some congregations also match new members with mentors to give them a first place to go with questions or concerns. For more information on such programs see [www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol1-6-membership.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol1-6-membership.html).

Volunteering is certainly a good way to get involved and meet people, as well as to learn about the business of the congregation. Yet caution is needed in this area, because new members can easily get burned out or disillusioned if they are suddenly swamped with hours of volunteer commitment. A number of congregations tell new members that their job in the first year of membership is to join a small group or to take an adult education class. First Unitarian Universalist Church in Richmond, Virginia, gives each new member a voucher for one free adult education class. East Shore Unitarian Church in Bellevue, Washington, has a Web-accessible listing of volunteer opportunities that includes smaller and more discreet tasks such as ushering on Sundays, as well as more extensive opportunities for involvement. (To see this site, go to [www.eastshoreunitarian.org/volunteer.html](http://www.eastshoreunitarian.org/volunteer.html).) The Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington, Virginia, is also using the Web to offer members opportunities to connect via their "Volunteer Depot" (see [www.uucava.org/org/VO\\_Opt\\_Intro.aspx](http://www.uucava.org/org/VO_Opt_Intro.aspx)).

A congregational culture that is welcoming and curious about new people can go a long way toward helping new people connect and become involved in the vital doings of the congregation.

### **How to Help New Members Find a Comfortable Place**

Helping members find a place where they can connect to the congregation is important. To learn more about how other congregations do this through mentorship and information gathering, go to

[www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol1-5-membership.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol1-5-membership.html). To learn more about mentorship, see "Mentoring and Friendship Programs Aid New Members," at [www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol1-6-membership.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol1-6-membership.html).



## MEMBERSHIP AS A LIFELONG JOURNEY

Often when we speak of membership, we are looking at ways to get people in the door. Yet an examination of the membership statistics of many congregations indicates that we need to be sure we are keeping people once they enter. Congregations wishing to remain vital should dedicate some time to thinking about how they serve all members, both new and existing, and to identifying any individuals or groups who seem to be slipping through the cracks or who are on the margins of the congregation.

### Closing the Back Door to Keep the Members You Add

Congregations have been better about developing procedures for attracting new members than about retaining existing members. Retention can be a particular challenge for rapidly growing congregations, whose longstanding members can feel alienated by the changes associated with growth. A number of congregations have become more intentional about finding ways to ensure that they are serving their members and connecting them with enriching and rewarding activities. To find out more, see [www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol2-4-membership.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol2-4-membership.html).



### A Culture Supporting Maturation Membership

Membership requires as much “inreach” as outreach, for the development of a strong Unitarian Universalist identity is one way to ensure that adults stay involved and that youth and young adults seek guidance and comfort from their Unitarian Universalist religious homes when needed. To find out more, see “Uncommon Denomination Tier I Resources,” at [www.uua.org/programs/congservices/uncommon/tier1\\_resources.html](http://www.uua.org/programs/congservices/uncommon/tier1_resources.html).

New members are often attracted by the freedom and breadth of Unitarian Universalism. More seasoned members may be seeking depth. A congregation needs the ability to provide both authentic personal relationships and religious resources to engage the mind and spirit at the deepest levels. A congregational culture that sees membership development as an ongoing journey that does not stop when one “signs the book” can go a long way toward ensuring that members continue to find enrichment and support through the congregation. Thus, this kind of culture is key to the long-term health of the congregation.

### **More Than a Fair-Weather Faith**

Unitarian Universalists who are confronting difficult times, grief, or loss need to know how their religious community will assist them. Making the resources apparent to members can be accomplished through discussion groups, support groups, or even book discussion groups.

In the introduction to his book *A Faith for All Seasons*, the Reverend William R. Murry writes, "No religion is worthy of its name unless it provides a vision of meaning and purpose for the individual's life and help in times of personal crisis. Unitarian Universalism has been accused of failing to provide these. It has been called a fair weather faith, beneficial to its adherents on sunny days but not helpful when days are overcast. I have written this book to refute that view and to offer questions to the deepest and most perplexing questions that confront us: the problem of why we suffer pain, loss and death, and the religious resources available to help us cope with these; and the search for a meaning and purpose that transcends the self."



### **Shared Ministry**

With a tradition of independent congregations and a long history of outstanding and courageous lay leadership, Unitarian Universalist congregations have long understood that membership means involvement. Our ministers share leadership with our lay leaders, albeit not always without some uneasiness. When the idea of shared ministry was introduced to our congregations in the 1990s, it gave a vocabulary for what we have long believed: that a congregation will only be successful if its members give of their time, money, and talents and if that ministry is more than what the professional minister does. For more on shared ministry, see [www.uua.org/cde/midsize2000/keynote.html](http://www.uua.org/cde/midsize2000/keynote.html). Shared ministry is covered further in the book *All Are Chosen: Stories of Lay Ministry and Leadership* edited by Margaret L. Beard and Roger W. Comstock.



### **Interest Surveys Help Identify Ministries**

Interest surveys can be one way to identify the specific ways in which a particular member may wish to provide shared ministry. Interest surveys can collect valuable information on new and existing members—*yet congregations should take surveys only if they intend to use the data.* Taking the time to fill out a survey when no one then responds can actually discourage people from participating. The Unitarian Universalist Church of Berkeley, Kensington, California has a survey available online. To see it, go to [www.uucb.org/survey/](http://www.uucb.org/survey/).

## **Leadership Development**

Another way to make membership a continued opportunity for growth is to be conscious of the opportunities that individual members are presented to serve as leaders. Although a mismatch between the requirements of a given position and the talents and skills of a particular member can actually make membership less attractive, a good match can help that member experience the sort of maturational growth that occurs when individuals are able to put their beliefs into action. Ensuring a mix in terms of age, sex, race, education, and other factors can ensure that the congregation as a whole also experiences the maturational growth that comes from grappling respectfully with multiple points of view.

The Unitarian Universalist Association, both through national gatherings such as General Assembly and through its districts, provides many opportunities for leaders to become connected to others. Another resource is the network of leadership schools throughout the continent. For more information on leadership schools, see [www.uua.org/interconnections/toolbox/vol1-2-toolbox.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/toolbox/vol1-2-toolbox.html).

In addition the Unitarian Universalist Association offers through its districts the Planning for Growth and Vitality Weekend Workshop for the Small Congregation (for congregations with 1 – 150 adult members) and the Planning for Growth and Vitality Weekend Workshop for the Smaller Mid-size Congregation (for congregations with 150 – 350 adult members). Contact your district office to learn if a workshop is scheduled for your district, or to request that one be scheduled. See [www.uua.org/cde/education/weekends.html](http://www.uua.org/cde/education/weekends.html) for more information. Both of the information boxes provided on pages 42 and 43 are excerpted from the Mid-size congregation workshop manual.



## Do Staff Priorities Foster Growth?

*Adapted from Gary L. McIntosh, Staff Your Church for Growth*

The best years of a church's numerical growth are often the first fifteen to twenty years of its existence. Although newer churches grow faster than older ones for several reasons, the priorities of staff and lay leaders contribute directly to numerical growth or decline.

Attracting People	Incorporating People	Celebrating with People
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### A—Priorities in Earlier Years Cause Growth

Educating People	Monitoring People	Caring for People
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### B—Priorities in Later Years Cause Decline

As a church grows, a single minister will find it increasingly difficult to give adequate time and focus to each of the six areas shown above. The church will stop growing when the minister is unable to handle all of the priorities. Because the growing numbers of members demand programs and services to meet their personal needs, the staff's priority will tend to shift to the three areas in row B. Hiring staff to serve in these areas, which most churches tend to do, can lead to an inward-focused church that takes care of its own needs and neglects attracting and incorporating new people.

All six of the priorities are necessary to provide the supportive environment needed for church growth. A church that desires to grow will not neglect any of the areas and will place a higher emphasis on the priorities on row A so that program staff will help attract people (spreading the word), incorporate new people (helping them connect), and celebrate (worship). A focus on these priorities promotes continued growth.

Senior ministers must understand their own strengths and hire program staff members with complementary talents and gifts. If a minister is strongest meeting the demands of row A, the second staff member should be strong in meeting the demands in row B.

### **The Leader's Role in a Growing Church**

The archetype of the architect is useful for defining behaviors and attitudes that leaders in a growing church need. The architect brings aesthetics and utility into harmony with one another, focusing on the strength of the materials while making the building aesthetically pleasing. The goal is the satisfaction of the future occupants.

The leader with the mindset of an architect cares as much about aesthetics as about practicality, as much about the religious reasons for growth as about the ministry infrastructure supporting growth, and as much about an individual's concerns as about the congregation's vision. Such a person will be known as a facilitator. This person creates conversations, as well as provides a place and time for airing concerns and reaching solutions to problems. By definition, a facilitator remains neutral in the discussion, thus expanding the congregation's capacity to integrate all input from the conversation.

#### **The Leader as Facilitator Does the Following:**

- ✚ Structures time for adaptive work for church members, knowing that during change, technical solutions alone won't produce growth.
- ✚ Makes discussions about values, personal commitment, and the congregation's mission prerequisites for moving forward.
- ✚ Focuses conversations on "those who haven't come through our door" and on future generations.
- ✚ Schedules frequent opportunities to discuss changing norms and processes and to collaborate in designing new ones.
- ✚ Listens with empathy and fosters growth in others.
- ✚ Ensures adequate resources to achieve the congregation's dream.

The facilitator in each of us cares as much about the religious reasons for building a vital church community as about the feasibility of the new building project.

## **Programming for Life**

The life cycle of membership is not tied to the human life cycle. Some "discover" Unitarian Universalism while in the womb or crib; for others the discovery comes in the last years of a long and fulfilling life. Yet different stages of life do require different religious resources, and congregations can help support members who are in different places on the membership and religious development spectrums.

### **Dealing with Theological Diversity**

The Reverend Christine Robinson, senior minister of First Unitarian Church in Albuquerque, New Mexico, points out that we have many kinds of theological diversity in our congregations. Robinson described three types of religious diversity: spiritual, developmental, and theological. Spiritual diversity is based on the differences in what we do—our practices. Examples include sitting meditation, prayer, Sunday worship, solstice ceremonies, small group spiritual sharing, and journaling. Spiritual practices are not just what we do on Sunday morning. Some congregations welcome a variety of practices and are organized to encourage such diversity. Some are not. Developmental diversity is based on differences in the age of the participants, whether they are newcomers or long-time members, and whether or not they are undergoing one of life's transitions. Transitions include changes in family circumstances, the various developmental passages of life, crisis, and changes of faith. Theological diversity is based on differences in belief. Atheists, deists, theists, agnostics, pagans, Christians, Buddhists, and transcendentalists are but a few of the groupings in this category. Congregations seeking to ensure that their programming supports members all along the spectrum should consider these different issues.

For more information on this subject see the Unitarian Universalist Association's Commission on Appraisal 2005 report *Engaging Our Theological Diversity* available from the Unitarian Universalist Association's Bookstore and on the Web at [www.uua.org/coa/reports\\_issued.html](http://www.uua.org/coa/reports_issued.html). See also the 2004 General Assembly workshop on theological diversity, on the Web at [www.uua.org/ga/ga04/3070.html](http://www.uua.org/ga/ga04/3070.html).

## **Religious Education**

A strong religious education program for children and youth is essential to healthy membership development and retention. With schedules as busy as they are today, families seek activities that they can do together and places that have meaning for them as a family. Excitement and ownership by the youngest members of a family will keep adults coming as well.

A common misconception is that religious education is only for children. In fact, religious education is for all. One way to think about meeting the maturational needs of all members is to look at what your congregation's adult education program offers. Be sure its offerings reflect the issues faced by people of different ages and different backgrounds, as well as people who are newer to organized religious life and others who are experienced seekers. Filling in the gaps may also be a way of attracting new members by providing targeted offerings that might appeal to them.

### **Programming Can Serve Existing Members and Attract New Ones**

The Unitarian Universalist Community Church in Glen Allen, Virginia, decided that they wanted to make a special effort to be welcoming to lesbian couples in their area. They placed advertising in an alternative newspaper to offer Cakes for the Queen of Heaven, which focuses on women's spirituality. This program was popular with existing members of the congregation, yet the congregation was intentional about reserving a larger number of slots for newcomers as well. After the class, almost all of the newcomers joined the congregation.

### **Small Groups, Small Groups, Small Groups**

Covenant groups, affinity groups, supper clubs, neighborhood groups, book clubs, and groups that assist with specific difficult transitions—such as groups for caregivers of elderly parents—can all provide the type of support that will keep members connected to the community. Midweek programming can provide both another way for newer members and friends to connect in a smaller setting and also an avenue for more experienced members who want something more than Sunday morning. Midweek programming also offers the possibility of greater participation for those who work Sunday mornings or who are tied up with other responsibilities, such as religious education. See “Midweek Events Connect Members with Fun, Worship,” at [www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol3-2-membership.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol3-2-membership.html).

### **Growth Brings Changes and Lots of Challenges**

Welcoming new members is exciting and important, because it means spreading Unitarian Universalism. Yet the influx of new members can make longer-term members feel unappreciated or even alienated. These negative feelings, in turn, can become barriers to growth and to healthy congregational life if they are not addressed. Being intentional about helping people navigate the changes that growth brings can ensure that new members are welcomed warmly and not treated by existing members as the force that is destroying “their” congregation. Care is needed, especially when growth brings large changes such as a switch to multiple services or a new building. To learn from other congregations' experiences, go to [www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol2-3-membership.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol2-3-membership.html).

### **Members Give and Receive Care**

A strong pastoral care program can help members navigate the largest challenges that life offers. Pastoral care can be as basic as providing meals to a family with a hospitalized member or as proactive as setting up a health ministry that allows members to identify problems before they occur. The Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Durham, North Carolina, has a multifaceted approach to pastoral care that focuses on the idea of community. As one care provider put it, "Although therapy is a valuable experience, I feel that what we really need the most in times of trouble is the solace of friends who care about us and the reassurance of being a member of a loving community." Eno River offers a caring committee, an aging parents support group, health ministries, and a pastoral listeners program. All of these programs offer members a chance to engage in meaningful and skilled volunteer work, as well as providing needed ministry in times of need. For more information on the Eno River program, go to [www.eruuf.org/CaringCommittee.htm](http://www.eruuf.org/CaringCommittee.htm).

## **Pastoral Care**

An active pastoral care or caring program can be essential to ensuring that congregations honor commitments to members. An important aspect of membership is to ensure that the congregation is able to be welcoming and inclusive as members age. And as people age, accessibility and transportation can become an issue in a new way.

### **Accessibility Serves All**

It is tragic when members who have given leadership to a congregation for many years feel they cannot attend services or participate in activities because their aging has made the congregation's facilities inaccessible to them. First Unitarian in Rochester, Minnesota, found this happening. "The biggest concern was that our elderly members weren't always able to come to church, and we were embarrassed when someone would come who couldn't use the stairs," says Beth Atkinson, former president. "They had to be pushed up a hill. We were losing potential members because of this issue." This congregation chose to make a large investment in upgrading its property and found that it paid off in terms of new members and increased numbers of rental groups. To learn more, go to [www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol5-2-membership.html](http://www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol5-2-membership.html).

### **Learn From Memberships That End**

Not all memberships will endure, and healthy congregations have clear procedures that can be initiated by people who feel it is time for them to move on and end their membership. The congregation can learn from the experience of these people; it can troubleshoot and better understand who is well-served by the congregation and who is not. Many membership committees call people who have resigned and ask them to answer three questions:

- What brought you to the church?
- What has your experience been like?
- What suggestions do you have for us to better serve our members?

Membership in a Unitarian Universalist congregation is a rich and fulfilling experience. Congregations who are able to embrace all that it means to be a member are in the best position to ensure that members remain active and contributing parts of the community.



## WANT TO READ MORE?

If you would like to learn more about membership and healthy congregations, consider the following publications:

Alexander, Scott. *Salted with Fire: UU Strategies for Sharing Faith and Growing Congregations*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1994.

Beard, Margaret, and Roger Comstock. *All Are Chosen: Stories of Lay Ministry and Leadership*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1993.

Heller, Anne Odin. *Churchworks: A Well-Body Book for Congregations*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1999.

Hill, Robert. *The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry: Saving the World Ten at a Time*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2003.

Mead, Loren. *More Than Numbers: The Way Churches Grow*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1993.

Oswald, Roy, and Speed Leas. *Inviting Church*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1987.

Rendle, Gil. *The Multigenerational Congregation: Meeting the Leadership Challenge*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2002.

Unitarian Universalist Association. *Belonging: The Meaning of Membership*. A report by the Commission on Appraisal. 2001. [www.uua.org/coa/reports\\_issued.html](http://www.uua.org/coa/reports_issued.html)

Unitarian Universalist Association. *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*. A report by the Commission on Appraisal. 2005. [www.uua.org/coa/reports\\_issued.html](http://www.uua.org/coa/reports_issued.html).

The Unitarian Universalist Association offers through its districts the Planning for Growth and Vitality Weekend Workshop for the Small Congregation (for congregations with 1 – 150 adult members) and the Planning for Growth and Vitality Weekend Workshop for the Smaller Mid-size Congregation (for congregations with 150 – 350 adult members). Contact your district office to learn if a workshop is scheduled for your district, or to request that one be scheduled. See [www.uua.org/cde/education/weekends.html](http://www.uua.org/cde/education/weekends.html) for more information.

