

Making Room in Our Hearts

Prairie Star District Keynote Address

Kansas City, April 2004

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I can still remember the first Sunday morning I visited a Unitarian Universalist congregation nine years ago. My wife Phyllis and our daughter Marcela, then 12, drove 20 miles from our home in Cottage Grove, Oregon, to Eugene that drizzly Sunday morning. Marcela had never been to church and Phyllis and I had not darkened the door of a church in nearly 30 years. Our good friends Joy and Martin Overstreet would often talk about activities and friends at their church, Michael Servetus, in Vancouver, Washington. Joy and Martin kept telling us we should try out the church in Eugene, that it was not all the things we hated about church, that we would find people like us there. I rolled my eyes. Finally, visiting the church seemed like the path of least resistance. Then we could say we had visited and that it just wasn't for us, thank you very much.

It seemed like the path of least resistance until we drove into the parking lot. Then it got a bit scary. Believe me, it was an act of courage to get out of the car and walk across the parking lot and through those doors. Was this going to be totally weird? Would we be smothered by overeager greeters? Or, worse yet, would we be completely ignored and made to feel unwelcome and unwanted? We were surprised that the people were nice, friendly but not pushy, that the service had a good, warm feel to it. The sermon, by a woman, no less, was thoughtful and challenging. Marcela even enjoyed the youth group.

We had been longing for a community of faith for years, although we would not have used those words. While our lives were fine, we felt isolated. We longed to be part of a community that shared our values and our hopes, a community where we could grow, where we could form deep friendships and where we could serve. We wanted to belong to a religious home where people cared for each other and where together we could be a moral beacon in the community.

I bet most of you here this morning can remember your first day. If you can remember your first time, recall how you felt walking in. It is so easy to forget the vulnerability, the hopes and the apprehension a visitor brings.

And now, nine years after that fateful morning in Eugene, here I am: a minister, working as Unitarian Universalist Association's director of district services, speaking at the Prairie Star District annual meeting. It's a UU miracle (staggeringly improbable but not quite supernatural). The doors of that church in Oregon opened unto a new world and a new life.

Phyllis, Marcela and I were lucky. First, we had been invited by friends (even if they belonged to a different congregation). Second, we found a warm welcome and people who spoke with us. Beyond that, we found a religious home, a religious community.

Alas, most visitors to our churches are not so lucky. How many of you have visited a UU church other than your home congregation? (Show hands.) How many of you have been ignored when you visited a church? (Keep hands up.)

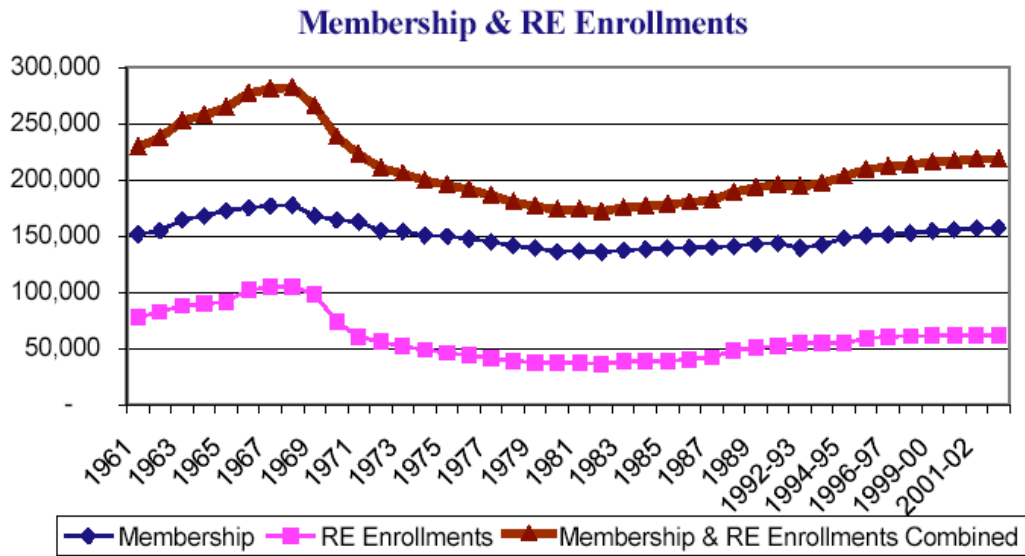
I have asked the same question all over the country, and all over the country most of the hands stay in the air. What do visitors experience when they come to your

congregation for a first time? What does your church feel like to a newcomer on Sunday morning? Does it feel like a club of which they are not a member? Do they feel welcomed, deeply, spiritually, warmly, welcomed?

What does a newcomer experience in your church? The answer to that question will determine the future of your congregation. What a newcomer experiences, repeated a thousand times across this land in a thousand congregations large and small, will determine the future of our movement.

And while I would love to stand before you and cheerlead, while I would love to paint a rosy picture of vitality and hospitality, instead I come to tell you that our future does not look bright. I believe we are in deep, deep trouble. That's the bad news. The good news, and it is good news, is that all of this can change starting next Sunday.

Let me tell you why I think we are in trouble. Today our congregations report just over 150,000 adult members. That is the same number of members reported over 40 years ago when the Unitarians and Universalists merged. During these two generations the American population has grown by 50 percent. In order to stay where we were 40 years ago, we would have had to have grown by about 75,000 members. And that is just to stay even.



In the last 20 years, things have been a little better. After a period of decline in the 1970's we have bounced back a bit. We have been growing at about one percent per year. Let's put that in perspective. We have just over a thousand congregations in our movement. In the last generation we have grown at the rate of one person per congregation per year. One person per congregation per year.

But these numbers are both true and misleading. National totals over time mask the details of what is going on. The fact is that we are a movement of healthy, vital, growing churches and, sad to say, a movement of declining and lifeless churches. Most of our churches are either growing or declining. The fact is that the two just about cancel each other out.

Humor me for a bit as we look at these statistics. Don't let your eyes glaze over too soon, for these are not dry numbers. These are human beings. These are people like you and me who want a liberal religious home. These are people who want to raise children who learn understanding and respect for difference, children who learn compassion and service. These are people who want to lead lives that rise above the soul crushing banality of consumer culture. These are people who seek spiritual growth and deep relationship. These are people who are appalled, just as you and I are, by hatred and violence.

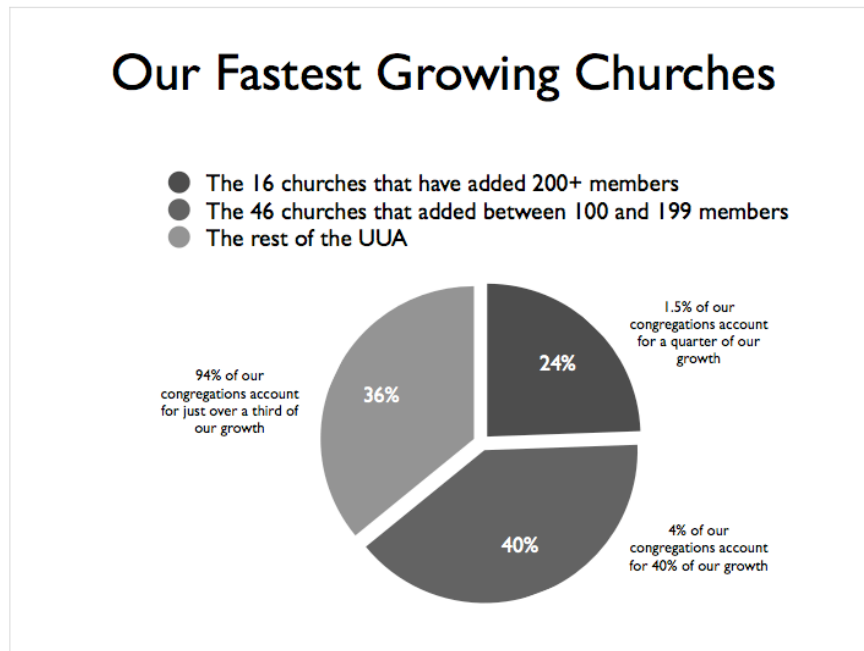
Our numbers are also congregations — some congregations thriving while others struggle.

Our numbers tell a story. I believe the story they tell is a frightening, cautionary tale.

Let's return briefly to some of the numbers that keep me up at night.

One quarter of our growth in the last decade came from 16 churches. Just over a dozen of our churches grew by 200 members in the last ten years (that is 20 members a year). In other words, about one and a half percent of our congregations accounted a quarter of our growth.

The next group, the churches that grew by 100 members over the past decade (10 members a year), account for another 40 percent of our growth. Together, about six percent of our churches accounted for almost two thirds of our growth.



The latest figures, which are not yet final, I believe are even more alarming. Ten of our twenty districts, exactly half of them, declined in membership last year. Luckily, the totals are still in the black, but just barely. (And I am pleased to tell you that Prairie Star District had the most growth last year – over 400 members. However, that comes after eight years of virtually no growth. Half of your growth was in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area.)

All seven of our districts in the northeast lost membership last year. Combined they lost almost two percent of their membership. Massachusetts Bay, the greater Boston area, where our faith is headquartered and where we have our historical roots on this continent, lost three percent of its members last year. Sadly, our movement is in steady decline in the part of the country where we were once strongest.

Now, during the past decade we have tried all kinds of ways to promote growth. We have tried zillions of workshops (some of which I have led). We had the Extension Program that subsidized new ministers in small and new congregations. And now we are trying advertising and a metropolitan strategy to start large churches in urban areas.

All of these efforts together do not amount to a hill of beans. We have no evidence that our workshops produce any real effect (not even the brilliant and engaging ones I led!). Our new congregation start efforts accounted for only a very small part of what little growth we have had. And our current efforts, even if they are wildly successful, will be statistically insignificant.

Now, each of these efforts has a place. I am not saying marketing has no place. I am a former newspaper publisher. I sold advertising; advertising fed my family. I am not saying that we should not start new churches in growing metropolitan areas. Of course we should. I am not even saying we should stop all of our workshops (although as I get older I am coming to wonder if holding a workshop should be our default response to all issues).

But I am saying that none of these efforts is going to grow our movement significantly. Please hear this: none of our growth efforts can grow our movement significantly.

Now let me run some very different numbers by you – and then I'll stop with the statistics, I promise.

A couple of years ago I started wondering about how many visitors come to our churches. I found out that nobody knows. Even that I find fascinating. Here we are, a movement that is made up of over 80 percent of people who were not born UU's. Converting visitors into members is our life blood. And yet we don't know how many visitors we have. Lots of our churches do not bother to count visitors.

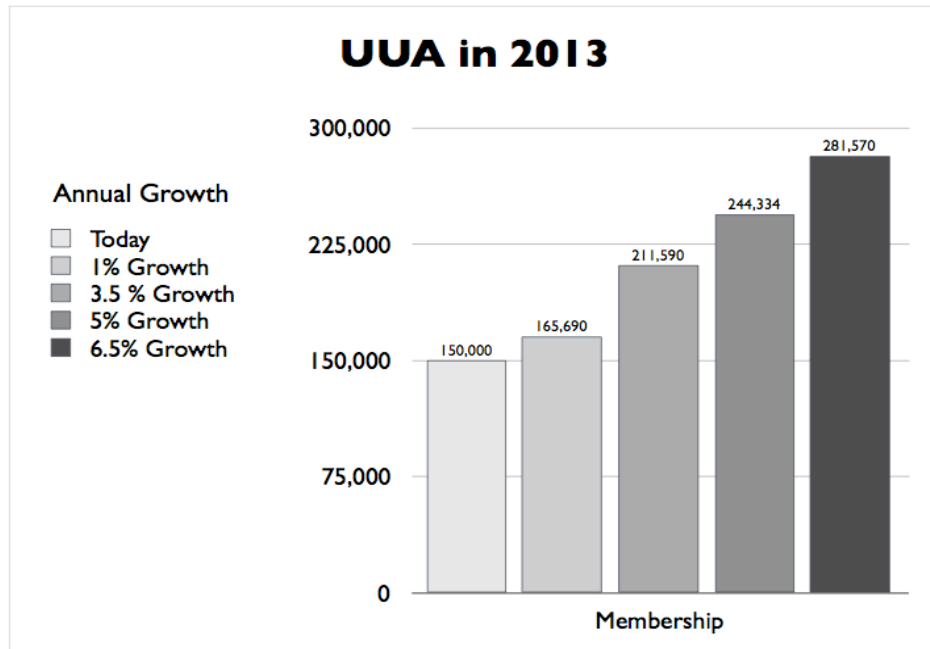
I did know how many we had at the church I had served in Colorado, because we did count. In the course of a year we had about twice as many visitors as we had members. When we counted we had 500 members and we averaged about 20 visitors a week. We figured we had close to a 1000 a year! I started checking informally with colleagues across the country. What I learned is that we easily get more visitors in a year than we have members. Most churches tell me they get about one and a half times to twice as many visitors and they have members. Think about it. A church of 100 members only has to average two visitors a week to get 100 in a year (and that includes Christmas and Easter).

Well, let's do a little math. Let's say our churches average just over one and a half times as many visitors a year as they have members. Remember, we are talking about an average of three visitors a week for a church of 100. I estimate that we have about 250,000 visitors a year. That is about 5,000 visitors a week. I used to think, years ago, that we needed to work to attract visitors. The truth is that we have hordes of visitors.

And who are these people? These are people who are looking for a place to connect. Another thing I learned as a parish minister was how many of our newcomers already knew a lot about us. Many have visited our web sites. In my church a surprising number had already read some of my sermons and recognized me because they had seen my picture on the web site. Our visitors are not people who got lost looking for the Baptist church or the Methodist church or the synagogue. And they are not people who come because they could think of nothing better to do that Sunday. Going to a strange church for the first time is a big decision. Our visitors make a conscious and courageous decision to visit an unknown church! Our newcomers are people who already share our progressive world view and who are looking for a place to belong. *They are us.* And they come every single Sunday. Thousands of them come to us. We don't need to do any outreach in order to grow. We need to do something much harder. We need to reach out to the people who come to us every week – the religiously homeless that are looking for spiritual shelter, the spiritually hungry who are looking for sustenance in religious community.

Let me put it as crassly as I can: In order to grow your congregation and my congregation and this movement of ours we just need to repel fewer newcomers. That's it. It is really that simple. We just need to repel fewer newcomers.

The chart below shows the UUA's membership numbers in ten years with five scenarios: if we stay the same, if we grow at 1%, 3.5%, 5% and 6.5%. One percent is what we have done in the past decade. In ten years we would be a little larger and we would have continued to shrink as a part of our nation's religious landscape (we are already less than one tenth of one percent). Three and a half percent growth would push us over 200,000 and would bring in an additional 60,000 of those people who are already coming to our doors looking for a church home. We have three districts that have averaged more than that amount of growth in the past decade, so this is doable on a district level. Five percent a year, a number that has been cited by Bill Sinkford as a target, would have us grow by almost 100,000 members. Finally, 6.5% growth would get us to 280,000. That 6.5% may sound fanciful, but our 200 fastest growing churches grew at that pace over ten years, so it is doable.



But these numbers are big and daunting. Let me bring it down to the level of your congregation and mine. If every congregation in Prairie Star District were to add two additional members a year and lose two fewer members a year, we attain the five percent target. Two additional new members, lose two fewer people. If we get four additional new members a year and lose two fewer, we get to the 6.5 percent target.

I said these numbers tell a story. The story they tell me is a tragic story of lost opportunity. It is a story of mind boggling contradiction. One the one hand, the numbers tell the story of a tiny religious movement that is shrinking steadily as a part of America's religious life and declining alarmingly in the region that gave it birth. On the other hand, the numbers tell a tale of religious seekers, people very much like ourselves, who come to our doors by the thousands week after week but fail to find the connection they are seeking. The numbers tell a tale of ineffective efforts to grow our congregations. And at the same time the numbers tell a story of enormous opportunity.

It is a story of a movement that says it wants to grow but that won't let people in who are trying to join us.

Why does a movement that says it wants to grow and that has hundreds of thousands of people ready to join it stay so small?

What are the barriers between us and the future we say we want? What can we do to make that future of vital, welcoming, growing churches a reality?

The answer is religion. Really. Religion. And more specifically, *religious community*. We have tried all kinds of things, mostly to little or no avail. Ironically, and tragically, we have never tried religion as a growth strategy.

The key barrier for us is not organizational. The key barrier is not financial. The key barrier is us.

The challenge before us, in every single one of our congregations, is religious and spiritual.

Now let me tell you a happy story. (You are probably ready for something less grim at this point. And this story has no pie charts.) Let me tell you a story of one congregation and how it removed some of the barriers and grew like a weed. This is the story of a congregation I know well because I served it for three years and this fall I will return to serve it again. The congregation is Jefferson Unitarian in Golden, Colorado, a suburb of Denver. I tell this story because I know it; there are dozens of stories like it.

Five years ago Jefferson was a large midsize church of 400 members that had been a church of 400 for twenty years. Every year 50 people joined and 50 people left. But the leaders at Jefferson sensed and believed that it could serve more people and be a stronger force in its community. Today Jefferson has a membership of 580. Last week I spoke with the part time new member coordinator who told me that we need to start thinking of how we are going to accommodate 800 members in a few years, because the people just keep coming and joining.

Now during this time Jefferson has had a new senior minister, a new associate minister, and two interim ministers. It also suffered a small crisis a year ago when its search for a new senior minister ended with the candidate not being called. During the last two years of turmoil and transition, when many churches would have experienced a decline, Jefferson grew by 50 members.

What happened? And, more importantly, what happened at Jefferson that can happen anywhere?

Well, lots of things happened. The main theme of all of them is that we began to pay attention to the kind of religious community we wanted to be.

One of the keys is that we started to pay attention to how we walked our talk of being a warm and welcoming place. We were typical of UU churches. That is, we had a belief that we should be welcoming and, deep down, we wanted to be welcoming. But there was lots of room for improvement. We talked about how being open to the stranger, the newcomer, is fundamental to our religious roots. We talked about how the Hebrew scriptures admonish the people to welcome the foreigner, recalling the bondage in Egypt. We reflected on how the Christian scriptures speak about all of us being precious in God's eyes and how we are all family, all children of God no matter what our ethnicity. We considered the Buddhist teaching that the idea of the individual self is an illusion, that what is ultimately real is that which connects us all. We did some religious reflection, some spiritual work. And we saw, when we touched our religious roots and our deepest aspirations, that to ignore a newcomer is the moral equivalent of not feeding the hungry and not housing the homeless. We saw that hospitality is a spiritual practice that frees us from the bondage of self absorption. Hospitality, deep religious hospitality, is openness to life and to relationship. We talked of how important it is to let the compassion in our hearts to translate itself into behavior. And we talked about the need we saw in our community as seekers came to us every week.

It began with spiritual reflection. We got in touch with our compassion, our aspirations and raised our awareness.

And then we looked at our behavior. We tried to see ourselves from the perspective of the newcomer. Frankly, we saw a lot that we could do better. We began doing a number of things better. But the danger here is to think if you simply write down what Jefferson or any other growing church does it will work in your congregation. It may or may not. So much depends on *how* you do it, on the *spirit* in which you do it. Some greetings come from the heart; other greetings are perfunctory. We can all tell the difference. The key is not the list specific things, but rather the process of discovering how we want to be in the world and then looking at what we do.

We did not make the spiritual practice of hospitality the job of the membership committee or the greeters. We talked often about how hospitality has to be part of the culture, part of our religious identity. Openness and warmth is everyone's job. In order to make room for newcomers in our congregations, we must first make room in our hearts.

I said that we took a look at our behavior and saw a lot of things we could do better. We made it a practice to have one or both ministers welcoming everyone as they come in. We hired a part time new member coordinator to be a consistent personal contact on Sunday mornings and to shepherd people from the first visit through the first six months of membership. We began our worship with a scripted statement of inclusion and welcome. We invited visitors to introduce themselves. We made a time for greeting neighbors part of the worship service. We created more events where new members could get to know each other and the ministers. We changed our roadside sign. We made sure our web site had up to date information and sermons. Mostly, though, we made hospitality part of our religious practice.

Imagine yourself now as a newcomer to this congregation. On the way from the parking lot you are greeted by the minister before you get to the door. Inside, you are welcomed at the welcome table and introduced to several members. When you are seated, the first thing you hear from the pulpit is a lay leader welcoming you. Soon after that you are invited to introduce yourself. A couple of minutes later (after you have suffered through a few announcements – you can't win 'em all), there is a short break where you are greeted by those around you. When the offering is taken, you are invited to let the basket pass, for you are our guest today and we are honored to have you. You are invited to attend a fellowship dinner (they are every two weeks) as our guest. We try to let you know that you matter to us and that we are glad you came.

Last year I saw a marvelous little item in the church newsletter. It was during the summer during the transition between one interim minister and another. The item asked for volunteers to be greeters, because for the first time in memory visitors had come and not been greeted as they walked up the walkway. Hospitality had become so much a part of the culture that when the church slipped, leaders noticed right away and sounded an alarm. The church understands that it is not enough to have a welcoming minister and a welcoming membership committee.

Of course, the congregation worked hard to make everything high quality – from worship and music to RE to social action. The better we did at making our church the church we wanted it to be, the more attractive it became to newcomers. Hospitality, real religious hospitality, involves far more than a warm greeting on the first Sunday. It means being open to new perspectives and new gifts new people will bring. It means being open to change. Religious hospitality is more than what happens that first Sunday, but it

absolutely must begin there. It does not matter if we are open to the gifts and ideas of new people if they leave that first Sunday not wanting to return.

And I don't mean to sound like this is a perfect congregation. It has all kinds of challenges, just like your congregation. And you know what, most of our visitors still do not stay and become members. If they did we would double in size every year. We couldn't handle it. All we did was get a little better, and it has made a huge difference.

I believe that what is happening at Jefferson and what is happening at scores of other growing churches can happen everywhere. What happened at Jefferson did not cost anything. It did not require special training. It required making room in our hearts and letting the affection in our hearts express itself. It meant letting the love in our hearts and the passion for our congregation guide us. It meant harnessing the enthusiasm and the skills we already had.

We stand at a critical time in our faith. We have been a declining part of the American religious landscape for two generations. None of this would matter, of course, if there were not thousands upon thousands of people looking for the religious community we can provide.

The gap between the reality of our condition and our potential is a chasm. Our future can continue to be one of gradual decline or we can choose to open our hearts and open our doors. Are we willing to feed the spiritually hungry and house the religiously homeless? It is our choice.

Ours can be a future of vitality, of relevance, of growth. We can serve those who come to us and together with them we can make a difference in our communities. A wonderful future of healthy, life transforming and growing congregations is ours for the taking. It is low hanging fruit, waiting to be harvested. We need but reach out and seize it.

The future of your congregation, the future of my congregation, and the future of Unitarian Universalism begins next Sunday. Our future will be created one heartfelt welcome at a time, one relationship at a time.

It all comes down to next Sunday. May you and I be there, with a smile on our faces and a greeting on our lips. May every visitor feel like he or she has finally, finally, come home. When we make room in our hearts, nothing can stop us.

See you at church.