

# Large Congregations and the UUA

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## Ministry and Mission

- ❖ Without a saving message, your congregation scarcely has right to exist.
- ❖ No congregation can grow larger than the vision, capacities and will of its Senior Minister—or the willingness of its members to respond to the call of that vision.
- ❖ The typical new Senior Minister is no less competent administratively than the typical new school principal, new chief partner of a clinic, or new senior partner of a law firm—*of similar size*, where size is defined by the number of professional staff and size of budget.
- ❖ Continuing education needs to become a greater priority for ministers, staff and lay leaders. In truth, we spend almost nothing on continuing education because most professional development funds are expended on attending denominational meetings. Such denominational participation is important but it's a contribution to our larger work more than it is professional development for the participants.
- ❖ The primary leadership responsibility of ministers, professional staff and lay leadership is “discipling leaders”—or “cultivating leaders,” if you will—something that somewhere between countercultural and utterly alien to Unitarian Universalists, who too often abhor the disciplines of discipleship ... and resist the language.

- ❖ Senior Ministers must be involved as key decision-makers in the selection of all junior colleagues and have general oversight of the staff as a whole.
- ❖ Congregations are as prone as any other institution to shop around for the advice that they want to hear rather than the advice they need to hear. Succumbing to this tendency will dampen your congregation's effectiveness, if it doesn't destroy your credibility first.
- ❖ It matters what you measure. And evaluation begins with the life of the congregation as a whole, NOT merely with the performance of its staff. Until a congregation takes stock of itself as a congregation—its faithfulness, its effectiveness, the degree to which its members live into its vision and mission—it has no real business evaluating its ministers and staff. If we fail to take ourselves seriously enough to assess how we are doing as congregations, then the communities we serve will not take us seriously or respond to our liberating message.

## Organization and Governance

- ❖ Ideologically conservative congregations tend to be strategically innovative and flexible, while ideologically liberal congregations tend to be structurally conservative and inflexible.
- ❖ Clarity is the first principle of both good governance and healthy emotional systems.
- ❖ After John Carver's *Boards That Make a Difference* and Max DePree's *Called to Serve*, the most important volume on governance that you will ever read is Richard Chaitt's *Governance as Leadership*. Used together, these governance resources will support governance that is both sound and adaptive.
- ❖ Healthy emotional systems matter at least as much as sophisticated organizational structures, although the latter contributes to the former.
- ❖ Modern governance theories are effectively used to correct the errors of our tradition of polity and the culture that has developed around it, not to replace our tradition of polity.

## Stewardship

- ❖ Unitarian Universalists are not cheap—they are unmotivated. Last year, the UUA’s large congregations expended an average of \$1,626 per member. Although not all of the revenue to sustain these expenditures came from pledge income, the overwhelming majority of it did.
- ❖ If your board is not drawn from among your most generous givers (of both time and money), where generosity is defined by proportionality rather than absolute amounts, your board will undermine the shared ministry and mission of your congregation.
- ❖ If membership and stewardship are not housed in a single department, both will tend to underperform, with the result that the church will never have as large a membership as it could, nor will it have all the resources it could potentially muster.
- ❖ Until Unitarian Universalist congregations “tithe to the world they serve,” they will never have enough resources to meet their internal needs.

## Growing Unitarian Universalism

- ❖ If you toughed it out last night, you would have heard from Harlan Limpert that the growth in our large congregations last year was three times that of the average UU congregation. It was still inadequate. And last year doesn’t change the longer-term fact that, contrary to what we may wish to believe, it’s actually midsize churches that are leading denominational growth. Larger churches are simply trading places in the pecking order.
- ❖ There is a glass ceiling: no Unitarian or Universalist congregation in North America has successfully maintained itself beyond 1500 members for longer than a single generation. The glass ceiling only exists because we will it to. (Our 45 largest congregations currently average 718 adult members each.)
- ❖ Our current size reflects the tyranny of experience and disappointment over vision and hope. (According to the estimates of Percept Demographics, our constituency constitutes 0.7% of the U.S. population, or 7 in 1,000 people.)

According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Life, our adherent base lies somewhere between 0.3% and 0.5%, or between 3 and 5 Americans out of 1,000.)

- ❖ Marketing is even more important to internal esteem than it is valuable in attracting newcomers. Genuine hospitality, a meaningful message, and spiritual maturity—as both individuals and congregations—are critical in attracting and retaining newcomers.
- ❖ Covenant group ministry pays big dividends but it continues to be underutilized in almost every congregation. Beyond providing members with opportunities for ministry, when done well, it provides an opportunity for discipling leaders, increases member retention, allows critical mass among small constituencies, builds congregational cohesiveness, and reduces the cost of educational and pastoral ministry; done poorly, it provides pockets for unhealthy dissent and drains resources.

## **Denominational Relationships**

- ❖ If the leaders of our most vital congregations fail to drive the agenda the future of Unitarian Universalism, that agenda will be set for decline. This is not a plea for arrogance and exclusion, but a call for your leadership.
- ❖ Not all of our large churches are among the UUA's most vital; nor are all of the most vital congregations large—indeed, some never will be.
- ❖ Without a saving message, your congregation scarcely has right to exist.