

**Essay Title:** Why Add a Worship Service?    **Audio Essay Series:** Disc 1, Track 17

**Author:** Margaret Beard

**Date of Release:** June 23, 2005

---

IS IT HARD TO FIND A PLACE TO SIT on Sunday morning? If YOU think so, think how newcomers must feel. Studies show that newcomers are much less likely to return if the sanctuary or fellowship hall feels too crowded. Plus longtime members may feel they aren't needed and they may stay home. If overcrowding persists, congregations in danger of reaching a plateau in membership, or actually shrinking.

When overcrowding is driving the move to add a service, congregations need to ask another question: Is adding a service a temporary step on the path to another solution, or is it the solution? If the congregation is also looking at either a building enlargement or relocation, the decision-making process will be different. Many people are willing to undergo radical change if they know that it will be for a limited time. The dream of returning to the status quo—the way things were before—eases the process. The members know that they will be back together again later on. However, if the additional service is seen as the actual solution or as the first of a series of additional services, members may be more anxious and concerned about the change.

Many congregations want to add a service simply because they *seek to grow*. They believe that Unitarian Universalism has something essential to offer people. These congregations have an evangelical sense of what it means to be Unitarian Universalist, and they want to share what they've found with others. This outward-focused mission is a more powerful draw to new people than the sense that they are wanted for their money and time.

More and more of our congregations are *embracing outreach missions* to serve various populations and groups within their communities. This ministry focus might be specific ministries to older people, single parents, young adults, disabled persons, people of color, or other groups that have a common interest or identity. Many times the groups are not currently represented in the congregation. Sometimes congregations discover that their current worship patterns do not adequately serve the part of the community they wish to reach. It is useful to involve people from the under served population in the planning of the new service and any additional programming.

Congregations that seek diversity often find that fulfilling the needs of atheists, agnostics, theists, humanists, and those who defy description often requires a variety of worship settings and styles. Adding additional worship opportunities can increase the strength of these congregations, and if done for this reason can also increase excitement and decrease resistance to congregational change.

*Continued*

Page 2 / Why Add a Worship Service?

In summary, rarely is there just one reason to create an additional service. Congregations need to ask: What is our central reason for being, and which of our primary objectives will help us embody it more fully? Clarifying the reasons for adding worship opportunities is essential to managing the change effectively. Linking the addition of a service to the congregation's identity and mission is important. Whether a congregation owes its existing membership more comfortable conditions or it wants to reach out to those not yet in its midst, mission-based and temporary changes are easier to explain and implement. Yet even congregations that feel forced to add a permanent service because of overcrowding can do so well if they plan properly and involve the members in that planning.

---

*This Audio Essay series was created by the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, for the purpose of supporting its valued lay leaders. Copying and sharing these essay texts, downloadable audio files, and the companion LayLeader Drive Time Essays compact disc is welcomed and encouraged. • Comments or suggestions? We welcome your ideas about this Audio Essay series and your lay leader questions. Please send them to Don Skinner, the editor of InterConnections, a resource for lay leaders. Email: [dskinner@uua.org](mailto:dskinner@uua.org)*

**Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations**, 25 Beacon Street, Boston, MA 02108 617.742.2100 [uua.org](http://uua.org)