

**Title: Energy, Enthusiasm, Essay
& Risk Build Vital Congregations**

Audio Essay: Disc 2 track 11

Some congregations just seem to know where they're going and how to get there. They have energy and enthusiasm, not only on Sunday mornings, but in their governing board meetings and in their small groups, and religious education programs.

What creates this feeling? What causes congregations that once struggled to rise above the status quo, to shine, to develop a "vision" of the ministry they want to provide in the world? Often that vision is inspired by a transformational experience—the start of a new ministry, making a conscious decision to grow, or holding a capital campaign, or sometimes just an inspirational speaker or workshop will spark a change.

Here are several congregations that have developed new visions of themselves.

The First Unitarian Church of Des Moines, Iowa, is on an upswing. After three decades of static membership, it's gone from 250 to 350 in the past two and a half years.

No one would have predicted this a few years ago, when the congregation was enduring a period of conflict. But that conflict was followed by several years of interim ministry, when the congregation took another look at itself and decided it wanted to be more than it had been—and to grow.

The Rev. Mark Stringer says, "Most of the congregation's growth has been a product of taking risks." Stringer acknowledges that he was one of the first risks, being called by Des Moines in 2001, right out of Meadville Lombard Theological School.

The congregation stretched in other ways. "For a while now," said Stringer in the spring of 2005, "we've been about a half position ahead of ourselves in staffing. Just before I came, the congregation hired a full-time administrator. Last fall we hired a membership coordinator. Our director of religious education has gone from three-quarter to full-time."

Other changes that facilitated growth and enthusiasm: First Unitarian decided to move from a board and committee structure to a council format, in which many decisions are made by working groups. Stringer encouraged the congregation to become more involved in the community.

Last fall the lay ministry team—the Care Crew—was revamped not only to serve shut-ins, but also to provide outreach to young parents, people needing chores done, and so on. “Now,” says Stringer, “we have two coordinators overseeing a bunch of working groups. If you’ve got the volunteers—and we do—it’s a fabulous way to go. We have 50 people involved on our Care Crews.”

More changes: a new Small Group Ministry program, now in its fourth year, helps connect people. Members switch groups every six months, and group leaders have their own monthly group. “That’s become a real leadership training ground,” says Stringer. “People are willing to be leaders because they only have to serve six months. In that time they develop stronger links to me, and to the church, and they’re willing to try another leadership role.”

Also a “leadership think tank” has replaced the Committee on Ministry. Stringer says, “I wanted more people to be involved and since the church’s level of trust in me seems strong right now, I wanted to try this.” About 25 people meet every couple of months to talk about what’s happening in the church.

Interim ministry gets some of the credit for these changes. And Stringer takes a little credit himself. “My preaching style,” he says, “is very focused on the newcomer.”

The Rev. Sydney Wilde is co-minister of the UU Church in Reston, Virginia. Social justice has helped energize Reston. Wilde says, “Several people have taken on social causes and they’ve gotten others involved.” A vote to hang a banner supporting marriage equality further energized the congregation.

When membership fell off several years ago, the Membership Committee, just four people, was boosted to 14. Says Wilde, “We spent time making sure people were welcomed and that brought our numbers back up.” Forty-two percent of the congregation is in 11 covenant groups.

Wilde says, “People have a place to go where their story is known. Also, there’s a huge sense this is a safe community. It’s not a place where people get into big arguments.”

A lay ministry program is beginning at Reston. A capital campaign is underway. There’s been a surge in adult religious education. Wilde and Co-minister Dennis Daniel see themselves as facilitators—and cheerleaders. Says Wilde, “When we get leaders who are excited we do everything we can to support and encourage them.”

The First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, has taken several steps in recent years to build enthusiasm and vitality. It added a second Sunday service and a second set of children’s religious education classes. A new family choir of children and adults sings monthly, and gathers for a weekly potluck before rehearsal. The Rev. David Herndon says, “It’s a new model of building community through music.”

The congregation also started a campus ministry program. A staff member, Devon Wood, coordinates that program 12 hours a week and additionally serves as Membership and Communications Coordinator, working especially with newcomers.

A small group ministry program begun in 2001 now has 15 groups with more forming. Some are families together in one group. The families gather for a potluck, then the adults have their meeting while children have supervised play.

The hiring of “a super choir director” is helping to nurture musical talents of members rather than relying on outsiders. As a result of all these changes, attendance and membership have increased. The 9:30 service has as many children as the 11:00. The budget is up. Herndon says, “We’ve countered the revolving door syndrome.”

Are there similarities among these congregations? Several are using small group ministry to deepen community. The addition of paid membership coordinators has been important for some. The addition of other staff, such as music directors and directors of religious education, or simply increasing their hours, can inspire a congregation. Focusing on something outside the congregation, such as social justice, also helps. And as Rev. Stringer at Des Moines reminds, “It’s all about taking risks.”

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Resources

You'll find more information about Small Group Ministry at <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/>

For information on Volunteer Coordinators, go to

<http://www.uua.org/publications/interconnections/index.shtml>

and do a keyword search for "Volunteer Coordinator."

Or go to the Leaders Library <http://www.uua.org/leaders/leaderslibrary/index.php>

and do a keyword search for "Volunteer Coordinator."

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