



The Importance of Small Congregations

by Rev. Dr. Ken Brown, District Executive for the Pacific Southwest District

Defining a “small” congregation is often difficult. Currently, the majority of congregations in the Unitarian Universalist Association have fewer than 150 members. We consider these congregations to be “small.” Yet most consultants who write about congregational size use active participation or attendance at worship as criteria, rather than membership numbers. Thus, there are probably quite a few congregations that the UUA counts as “mid-size” that, by this definition, would be considered small.

According to current statistics, 65% of *all* UU congregations have fewer than 150 members, and 28% have fewer than 50 members. These congregations are found in all parts of the continent and in all sizes of communities, and they are often the only congregation representing Unitarian Universalism in their regions.

There is no doubt that small congregations are vitally important to Unitarian Universalism.

There are two points about small congregations on which many consultants agree. First of all, they believe that small congregations will survive into the future, in numbers similar to the numbers they represent today, because most small congregations will become niche congregations, meaning that they will serve a particular group, community, or neighborhood.

Second, many denominations are turning more congregational work over to regional bodies. For Unitarian Universalists, this means that Districts can work with congregations to create helpful workshops that speak directly to the culture of the small congregation, rather than taking cookie-cutter directions from headquarters.

This means that small congregations, like congregations of all sizes, need a clear shared mission that is based on a clear plan for the congregation’s future. The most recent survey in the publication *Faith*

Communities Today, in which Unitarian Universalist congregations took part, shows that leaders from 91% of the congregations responding stated that they wanted more members. However, only 71% said they had clear mission and purpose.

If a small congregation wants to grow, it needs to decide what growth means. Does your congregation want to grow to be a mid-size congregation? Does your congregational mission include a commitment to serving more Unitarian Universalists because you believe that you could have greater impact in your community if you had more members? Do your members believe it is important to spread the good news of Unitarian Universalism? If you answer “yes” to these questions, then the members of your congregation need to develop a clear strategic plan to move into the future. Such a decision also means developing structures and organizations that will serve a congregation larger than you are currently.

Small congregations can increase their vitality by understanding that they cannot be all things to all people. As a leader of a small congregation, your role is to help the congregation find its niche. Your niche might be serving mainly retired people or young families, or offering innovative worship, or being involved in a key social justice issue in your community. Whatever your choice of niche, it is also important to continue to strive for excellence in worship and to follow up with visitors. It is crucial to the future of Unitarian Universalism that small congregations continue to offer vital and varied ministries.

I also encourage you to work with your District staff to develop workshops aimed to help small congregations with worship, governance, and diversity in all its aspects. And remember that your congregation cannot be all things to all people. The importance and vitality of a small congregation is related to its ability to focus on a clear mission and a deep understanding of what niche it fills in its community.

Small congregations are important because they continue to represent the majority of Unitarian Universalist congregations. Small congregations are important because most of our mid-size congregations started out small – and 53% of the Unitarian Universalists who are in UUA congregations are in mid-size congregations. Small congregations are important because they serve as an entry to Unitarian Universalism for many people. Small congregations are important because they keep the Unitarian Universalist presence in many communities.

For those of you working to sustain vital ministry in small congregations, thank you for your efforts, thank you for keeping our light burning.

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