

Some of you may not be aware that I'm the chairperson of the Pacific Central District's Growth Committee. Heck, I'm even willing to bet that many of you don't know that Unitarian Universalist districts have Growth Committees. Well, they do and I'm the current chair of ours.

So, what's a District Growth Committee, you ask? It's a group of lay leaders and ministers from congregations throughout the District who meet regularly to administer various kinds of grant funds in support of congregational projects designed to encourage numeric growth. The funds come from Chalice Lighter donations given in response to a "call" three times a year. Chalice Lighters pledge to help with growth-related projects by making a regular contribution to the grant fund. The Growth Committee reviews grant applications, awards and monitors funds, and looks for trends and approaches that help build congregations.

In our District, this program has helped fund things like hiring membership coordinators or RE staff, sponsoring UU kids' summer camps, helping purchase sanctuary furniture, purchasing advertising and community outreach materials, and other growth-related initiatives. The Growth Committee spends a lot of time thinking and researching and paying attention to what helps congregations meet their goals to grow in numbers.

There are lots of ways in which a congregation can grow; increasing numbers is only one measurement. For example: Congregations can grow spiritually – expanding their sense of commitment and depth of spiritual practice. Congregations can grow maturationally – enhancing their leadership and organizational structures to reflect a more sophisticated level of professionalism. Congregations grow their sense of internal community – increasing their engagement and interpersonal intimacy with one another and forging stronger bonds. Congregations can grow in mission – finding and expressing their purpose in the larger community.

In our District, the Growth Committee is focused primarily on numerical growth; increasing the number of people who identify themselves as Unitarian Universalists and participate in our congregations. The good news is that congregations do grow in numbers. Many of the UU congregations who receive Chalice Lighter grants see some increase in their membership numbers. They also report increased vitality and commitment in their membership.

However, if there is any "bad news" in the Chalice Lighter grant program it would probably be that we've found no "magic" answer to what supports a congregation in achieving its goals of getting more members. Several congregations have implemented a membership coordinator kind of paid staff position. Some have found this effective in integrating potential new members into their flock, but some have not. Some have felt that their efforts at advertising have enhanced their outreach, but overall, advertising, in and of itself, does not appreciably seem to increase membership numbers. There's no single type of growth strategy in the history of our District's Chalice Lighter grant funding that we've been able to identify as a fool-proof way to grow in numbers.

Rather, what seems to be true is that congregations yearning to grow do so because of their commitment to and readiness for being a growing congregation. It seems that the sense of mission, the sharing, the thinking, and the energy that goes into planning for growth is exactly the kind of spirit, commitment, and effort that encourages growth. Congregations grow when the whole congregation is ready to try something new and to embrace whatever happens as a result of giving that something new a try.

In June, our Association elected a new president, the Rev. Peter Morales. Rev. Morales campaigned on a message of helping people see UU as the “religion of our time.” His former congregation, in Golden, Colorado, experienced incredible growth, and they’ve created videos, workshops, and other materials to share their experience with other UU congregations. Many of their experiences and suggestions have been implemented here at UUFLG.

Rev. Morales encourages all of us to “repel fewer visitors” by developing our ability to be welcoming and friendly to our many visitors. Often people who visit a church will feel that no one notices that they are there. I’m very proud to say that that would not be the case here at UUFLG! We’ve done a lot to insure that people who pay us the compliment of coming to visit on a Sunday morning are seen, welcomed, and included in our activities. I’ve often introduced myself to our guests and asked if they have had the chance to talk to anyone or have had their questions answered. Inevitably, they tell me “yes!” Sometimes they are even seem a bit surprised by how friendly and open people have been with them here at UUFLG. That’s a good thing!

Every person who comes through our doors, every one of us here, was “new” at some time or other. And, each of us has a different timeline for when we no longer felt like a guest and somehow sensed that we’d crossed over a threshold of feeling like one of the congregation. Some people feel like they are at home almost immediately. They are ready and eager to join in, and very shortly, it feels to all of us that they are one of the family. We can’t imagine a time when they weren’t one of us. And, others take more time to find their niche in the congregation. Either way is fine – it’s a part of who and how we are as people. And joining and embracing a community are somewhat organic kinds of processes. We need to allow all kinds of joining to be okay in our community.

I use the term “we” because it’s an important part of growing a congregational community. There may be those among us who think that welcoming and embracing new people into this community is some one else’s job. “Doesn’t the Membership Committee do that?” “Well, Victoria’s the minister. Isn’t that the minister’s job?”

Here’s the truth. If you are a part of this congregation, as a UUFLG member or friend, you have a part to play in how this community thrives. I may lead, support, inspire, or even cajole, but in the end, all of us are a part of this faith community because of the ways we relate and interact with one another. Growing a congregation is everyone’s job, everyone’s responsibility, and everyone’s privilege.

Daniel Smith and Mary Sellon, who contribute to The Alban Institute, a consulting and resource firm for churches, have written: “Businesses are based on the premise of offering something of value – good or services – to a customer in exchange for money. Successful businesses give value for money. Congregations are not businesses, yet they can fall into a similar trap of thinking that it’s the features and gimmicks that people want. A congregation’s greatest asset, the unique gift it offers, is

the people who make up the congregation and the possibilities for transformation they embody.”

One of the vital strengths of a small church is relationship - our ability to know, see, talk with, and encourage each other because we have the chance to befriend each other and be a part of each other’s lives. Here we can experience belonging. We can share our joy and appreciation with one another, and be there for each other when life throws us a curve ball. In a small church, we can give each other hope and demonstrate our Unitarian Universalist values by how we live and practice them together.

Now, strengths can have a shadow side, too. Small churches often feel like a family. And families can be hard to break into. In families, “new people” stick out. It can feel to new folks like they have to think, act, or engage in the congregation in certain ways in order to be “admitted to the family” and fit in. And that’s not what Unitarian Universalism is about.

In small congregations, people often have settled into specific roles and “comfort zones” around their involvement and participation. It can feel uncomfortable in a small church when new faces and ideas and needs show up. If you’ve been around and in a congregation for awhile, changes can feel like you’re losing something familiar and comfortable.

Growth does mean change in a congregation. Congregations are systems of people, and adding new faces, ideas, and needs to the system create inevitable changes. Our best strategy, as individuals and as a congregation, is to become more comfortable with change, ever more willing to say “yes” to what happens when we open ourselves to the new.

A number of years ago, Carl and I took classes in improvisational theater. Being able to work with others in a cooperative and creative manner takes a commitment to be open to what happens and to respond in the moment. The instructor’s motto was “Yes, and...” In improv, if you insist on things being a certain way, you aren’t doing improvisation. In order to make it work, you’ve got to be open to what’s happening around you, to say “yes” to whatever it is, and then commit yourself to being involved by saying “and” as you prepare to add your own creativity and involvement to the mix.

That strategy helps grow churches, too. Because being in a congregation is a lot like doing improv theater. New ideas, new people, new opportunities are always presenting themselves. “Yes” we are a small church family. And, “Yes” we want to grow. “Yes” we welcome new people to our congregation. And, “Yes” there’s room here for you. “Yes” we want to share our community with you. And, “Yes” you are valued here.

Let’s remember our UUFLG mission and focus on being that congregation, living out of our commitment to create and sustain a beloved community, a place of acceptance, hope, and transformation. Our mission expresses our yearning to live out our desire to do something more than be a social club for those who show up, but rather a place of hope and transformation. Our mission is important for that reason, and our desire to live that mission makes this a place where people want to show up. Remember the different ways congregations grow from this morning’s opening words: by finding “our kind of people,” – those who yearn for a world lived by our values of inclusion, acceptance, justice, and dignity. By being involved in the larger community, visible in demonstrating our UU

values and mission in action. By being a congregation of people who show our commitment and vitality by being inspired, caring, and disciplined in our faith practice.

You're going to have the chance to hear about the UUFLG "state of the congregation" this morning. Your engagement and involvement is a part of what makes this a vital community. Being informed is a part of that engagement and involvement. Unitarian Universalists operate congregationally, that means that each of us is a part of making sure this small church family works; it's not up to others to manage our community for us, we do it together. To do that successfully, you need to know how the structures of this congregation are doing. That's why we share this information with you on a regular basis. And, of course, there's lunch afterward – another way we can be together, share with one another, and enjoy being a part of this congregational family.

- Refer congregants to cards in OOS. Ask them to write down an idea that they have for growing the congregation.
- Worship associate to collect cards.
- I'll have ideas collated and distributed to all.

For sixty years, UUFLG has been a light of liberal faith. There is much to be proud of in this congregation's accomplishments and much to recommend UUFLG as a faith community. Certainly, there have been bumps and challenges along the way – that happens in congregations. Yet, through the years, the UUFLG "family" has continued to offer open arms and open hearts to people seeking a UU faith community.

I want us to continue to look for ways to be a welcoming place for the many people in our neighborhood who want us, need us, and would be nurtured by the hope of Unitarian Universalism and by being in this congregation. I believe that Rev. Morales is right – we can be the faith for our time. We can be the faith community that people are looking for. We can say "Yes."

Let's continue to make sure our hearts and doors are open wide, embracing people into the UUFLG family and making a place for them at our table.

May it be so.