

Why Do We Need UU Congregations?

Daniel Polk, President of NT AUUS danieldale@att.net
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The E-Word (Evangelism) Sermon

In a workshop last year with Gini Courter, moderator of the UUA, I was thoroughly impressed with the way she manages a group. If you ever have a chance, such as General Assembly, do go watch her in action, as she chairs the meeting of several thousand UU's who of course have thousands of opinions. At one point we split into discussion triads, and one question really got me going. She asked us "Why does the world need UU congregations?" and gave us some of her answer before turning us loose. I was in a dither, as our group of three had just five minutes to share with each other, and I knew I had much more than two minutes' worth as my answer. This sermon has been percolating for years and she had just given me a handle for it; in fact, she took away my excuse for not getting the dang thing written.

In our discussions, most of us took the question to a personal level, asking instead "Why do **I** need a Unitarian Universalist congregation?" Many of us answered along the lines of "I need a place to be a heretic, a freethinker, to be liberal AND religious, to be where my beliefs can change as I grow, where I can fully belong, where I can question, without being an outcast." Brothers and Sisters, can I get an Amen here?

As for myself, I definitely need the outlet to be a heretic, as I can often be contrary just on principle- more on that in a minute. I need to be able to question, with the freedom to not automatically accept all that I am told. I can only belong where it isn't assumed I believe the same as everyone else, where I don't have to bow my head when I pray, where I don't have to stand in silence during the recitation of a creed or feel like a hypocrite if I mouth the words, where I can sing all the words of a hymn, not just some of the lines, and where I am accepted openly, without reserve or condition. Does any of that that strike a chord with you? I had searched for this faith for nearly a decade before I was ready to find it, as I had not conceived that such a thing could exist. Now that I know, I want to spread the word far and wide, and to help build our congregations for future generations



North Texas Association of Unitarian Universalist Societies

As I said earlier, I am a contrarian by nature; my parents and teachers would probably agree that I was a ‘challenging’ child. I read a great deal, started telling bad jokes at an early age, and often came up with a smart-aleck answer or a question that rearranged the ground rules. And **stubborn**- once, in grade school, the art teacher told me that my drawing of a car was not accurate; I replied that’s how I wanted to draw it. I will never forget the sight of this buxom woman with big red hair, wearing a bright blue dress, saying, “Well if you want to be contrary, so can I!” Her name was Stella Stevens, and of course I’m nothing like her.

In second grade, not only had I figured out that waving my hand and calling out “I know! I know!” wouldn’t get me called on, but I came up with a strategy that would work. I cleverly watched traffic outside while the teacher was explaining something, so that when she called my name, I could answer the question. At the age of seven I did this!

And on the Sixth Grade picnic, a teacher told us that we could not go over to the water fountain- her answer to anything was going to be ‘No.’ hmmm- “Mrs. Jensen, do I have to stay here without going to get a drink of water?” I take after my paternal grandmother but that’s another story.

I’m sure many of you remember the parents’ curse, “Just wait until you have children of your own”? I’m sure there is a teacher’s version, and yes, I have had the joy teaching younger versions of myself. How’s that for a scary thought?

I often wonder how my life would have been different had I grown up in a UU church that affirmed differences, that embraced and celebrated the entire person, and had an OWL class. For our visitors, let me say that OWL stands for *Our Whole Lives*, a curriculum used to teach holistic sexuality in a inclusive and honest manner. Such a positive approach would have been an antidote to my family’s dysfunctions, of which there were plenty, and growing up in a more supportive atmosphere would have made my coming out process much easier. Instead I remember a tortured brat who used wisecracks and sarcasm to keep others at emotional arm’s length, and who survived depression, emotional pain, and isolation, often self-imposed.

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Like many others, I knew I was home as soon as I walked in the doors of my church, and that feeling has only deepened- I remember a time I was congratulating myself for progress in therapy, and asked what had helped in my personal growth. Two things immediately came to mind - watching my mother blossom after my father's death, and the loving and unconditional acceptance by my church family, especially heterosexual men, something missing from my childhood.

One reason I like to work with our youth is to enjoy, even celebrate, how special they are, and in hope that a bit of it rubs off on me. One incident highlights this, from when I was an advisor, a decade ago, at SWUUSI Youth Camp. One of the boys accidentally hit another, and after making sure his buddy wasn't injured, asked a question I would **never** have heard amongst the guys at high school in my day: "Are you ok? Do you need a hug?" Our kids *are* special.

I also wonder about others like me out there in today's world, lost souls who are searching and questioning, people of all orientations who need our message of acceptance and love. I think about our Gay and Lesbian teens who are two to three times more likely than their hetero counterparts to attempt suicide. That's right- girls struggling with sexuality are twice as likely to kill themselves, while boys are up to SIX times more likely. Those numbers are about twenty years old, before the internet and a raft of new issues; coming out happens much earlier today, with thirteen as the average age- as if Seventh Grade weren't challenging enough. BLGT homeless youth are especially vulnerable, at 40% of the homeless youth population, for just one of the stats. We also have at least twice the substance abuse of the general populace, four times the rate of spousal abuse, and police officers tell that disturbance calls are about more violent incidents than with hetero couples.

And I remember one woman who told of finding us while in the Boston Gay Pride Parade: after passing Arlington Street Church, one of our cathedrals complete with stained glass windows, with all its bells ringing in the steeple and joyfully adding to the air of celebration, she turned the corner and came up on our headquarters at 25 Beacon Street, where she saw the UUA staff out on the balcony, waving rainbow flags, and she literally RAN over to find out more about us. She had seen the beacon of our faith. And in a shameless bid of promotion, I will tell you the Dallas parade is in September.

I also think about those who have internalized messages of hate. In the research for her novel *The Drowning of Stephan Jones*, Bette Greene interviewed four hundred teenagers convicted of hate crimes, of gay-bashing. She found a common thread, that most of them had been raised in conservative religions, on 'family values,' where they had learned that homosexuality was a sin; while committing assault and even murder, they were just acting on what they had been taught as children.

I need my church because I need to be with those who teach love and acceptance, those who believe in mutual support and growth, whose minds are open to new possibilities and ways of thinking, and who work to make the world a better place. I NEED my church- what about you?

Now for some of Gini's answer, her response to the question that got me going on this- see if any of it resonates for you:

I need Unitarian Universalist congregations because I want to be a whole person while I travel my religious path. I want to grow my strong spirit and subtle soul in the company of others. I need a UU congregation so that I have a place to be religious without compromising my soul.

I need a Unitarian Universalist congregation because the children and youth that I interact with need a place to learn values that affirm life and celebrate difference. They need a place to learn personal skills that will support their souls while they grow toward adulthood. They need to learn that they are each a special blessing, unique and yet connected to a human tribe that extends around the world. They need to know this so they can develop some immunity to the toxic messages that they're immersed in every day. I need a UU congregation so our next generation of leaders will survive.

I need a Unitarian Universalist congregation because I find something transcendent there, not every week, but many Sundays, if I am open to receiving it. Something holy sneaks in the door, sometimes in a reading, or the sermon....often in music...and I am connected to the common human experience. That moment of transcendence restores my soul and my humility.

She is eloquent, isn't she?

Now let me take the question to the larger level- in addition to individuals, society as a whole needs us, as a voice of dissent and reason, to represent the minority viewpoint. Many of us feel called to join in tackling difficult issues of the day, not just health care; we strive to help shape a rational and

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clear-headed, we hope, process for policy changes, maybe not to keep us on the straight and narrow, but at least going in the right direction. We helped found this nation some two hundred years ago, and I don't think that job is anywhere near done.

Our communities need us, as a neutral meetinghouse, as a place for civic dialogue, for our contributions without the pressure for people to be 'saved' in order to be served, as a sacred place for interfaith marriages and families, and for funerals when other places of worship shut their doors or seem less than welcoming. Just last year a church in Arlington, Texas, canceled a funeral the day before it was to take place, with a message on an answering machine, when the pastor found out that the deceased, brother of a long-time member, was gay.

There was also the memorial service years ago for a dear friend, which would have been held in someone's backyard had it not been the month of January- you know there would have been an ice storm. I remember being particularly proud that my church was available; few backyards would have had space for 375 people. It was also a comfort to his Methodist parents that the service was in a church, and not, as Al would have chosen, the UAW or Teamsters meeting hall.

I need my church as I participate in community, to know that I am not alone, and to let synergy and cooperation magnify my efforts, make them stronger and deeper, and give them permanence. Without my church my voice might be lost in the winds, but in a group it can have real and lasting impact.

Be with me as I attempt to channel more of Gini's answer:

Our country needs Unitarian Universalist congregations because we strive to be an example of what caring community might look like. Whatever our liturgy, what most defines UU communities is a willingness to imagine and dare to create congregations that are both broadly and deeply inclusive in every sense of the word, a community where all are worthy and all are welcome, a community where we dare to be authentic, to tell each other our truths and demand truth of each other, a community that defends democracy, a community that is engaged with civic life, with the world, and which does not flinch from its responsibilities, does not deny its role as a beacon of hope in a hurting world and a center of service to the folks in their community. Our country needs UU congregations.

We Unitarian Universalists draw from many sources, but in the center of our faith we know that life isn't simply about passing time, about getting through this life so that we can get a front seat in the next life. We know that this life isn't a purposeless exercise because we have witnessed lives of great meaning. We know that clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, housing the homeless and bringing hope to those who have none are purely human tasks. We know beyond a doubt that humans must tend to the health of the earth, the only home we have, perhaps the home of all the life that exists in the universe.

Based on our knowledge, we often find the courage to put our religious values to work. We call it doing justice, and working for peace, and sending emergency aid, and giving books to children, and teaching tolerance, and housing the homeless and agitating to end torture, and taking tools and sweat and hope to the Gulf Coast, and other areas of need. Every part of our tradition, every source of our knowing, calls us to service in the world. The world needs Unitarian Universalist congregations, and UU congregations need leaders.

Hallelujah!

It is my deepest hope that you have heard this morning, in these words, a call to strengthen and expand our congregations, to build up our faith community. Now let me say I am not in favor of growth just to be big. Instead, numbers tell that we are reaching people who need to hear the word, people who are desperate for the good news of Unitarian Universalism. It's time we stopped hiding our light under a basket. Or in the fine Unitarian tradition, reserving membership for those determined enough and intelligent enough to find us.

Let me reiterate that I am not for growth just for the sake of growth, but that it is a natural outcome for an effective congregation. I sometimes hear folks say that they are opposed to growth- well, let me tell you, if you aren't growing, you're dying. Members will pass away and move away, and if new folks aren't joining, your numbers will eventually shrink. In one of our growing congregations, someone recently commented that they wanted to limit RE to forty kids- let me ask, what if you, or your child were the forty-second? How would you feel if your name was put on a waiting list, like an exclusive private school? Do we want to cap enrollment and membership, or do we want to get creative about finding space when things get crowded, when people who are seeking the beauty of our faith find us?

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Others say that they like a small church where they know everyone. I appreciate and understand the desire, but some use that as a cover for keeping the church small enough so that a few people can control everything. Besides, isn't making new friends part of life's adventure? If you do find yourself in a large congregation, please, join a group of some kind, any kind, because that is where you will make deep and lasting connections, not over coffee after service. Finally, if you offer strong and vibrant programming, people will come and join. If you don't have such, why not? Aren't you yourselves worth it?

And I find it surprising that in such a fast-growing town in the South, with two major universities, this congregation is not larger. In the past decade, Denton has grown nearly half again while your membership has declined by 21%. The city itself has about 120,000 people, so let's say the metro area has 200,000; an average UU church would have about 110 members and forty youth. The Dallas-Ft Worth area has lower percentages, and along those lines, you would have 75 adults, about where you are now. But if we followed Tulsa's numbers, there would be at least a thousand UUs in Denton, and more than 32,000 in North Texas. Of course, it helps if there is a preacher stirring things up- one of the reasons All Souls Church is our largest congregation is that John Wolf was often on television in the Oil Boom years of the 60's and 70's, debating Oral Roberts and building up his own church. But there are many students here in town, like the young sailor in this morning's reading, souls who are searching for meaning and direction, longing for community. Campus outreach can take a long time to show results, but our young new minister in Dallas first came to Red River UU at the suggestion of one of his profs at Austin College, and our Youth Director enjoyed the Friday night discussion groups when she was a student at UNT a few years ago. Students may not join and pledge until after they graduate and move away, but what is planted early and nourished will be well-rooted.

In closing, let me ask you the same question that started it all - "Why does the world need Unitarian Universalist congregations?" Why does Denton, and why do **you** need a UU congregation?

closing words by Lauralyn Bellamy-

If here you have known freedom, take it with you into the world.

If you have found comfort, go and share it with others.

If you have dreamed dreams, help one another, that they may come true!

And if you have known love, give some back to a bruised and hurting world.