

# *To Build a Church: A Vision of Growth Through the Lenses of History* or *And We Go On*

Daniel Polk, President of NTAUUS [danieldale@att.net](mailto:danieldale@att.net)

Delivered to RRUU August 15, 2010; **may only be used with permission.**

I went to leadership school way back when, in its fourth year and before it was named DBLE, when Bill Clinton was still a presidential candidate; I strongly encourage anyone to attend as it is a week that for many, is life-changing. It is a great chance to learn about organization dynamics, the UUA, your beliefs, and yourself. Among our rituals was the telling of light bulb jokes, and we did all the standards: one to hold the bulb and a million to turn the world, and of course, umpteen variations on the electrical committee. We also wrote some new ones, and I thought I would share some here, because I'm sure anyone else is far too polite. So- How many UU's does it take? I'm so glad you asked.

- At least four or five- one to facilitate, some to carry out the task, and one to explain the process.
- Perhaps the bulb doesn't need changing at all, and we actually need to reexamine our own expectations.
- After study, we might see that the bulb has merely evolved further, and to attempt external change might harm the eco-cycle of the light bulb.
- It hasn't been decided yet, because the first question is the existence of light. Even if we do manage to agree, we may not want to change the bulb to avoid alienating those who use some other form of illumination.
- Seventeen- one for each Myers-Briggs personality type and one to facilitate.
- and, Could you please be more specific when you say "change"?

Finally, one of my favorites: we don't need light bulbs- we light chalices! It was both ironic and distressing that we all knew the jokes, but few knew the history of the chalice. Over the past few decades, it has been adopted by our congregations for use in worship, is worn on jewelry and is now used as our denomination symbol, and is printed on stationery as well as on our order of service. For nearly six centuries, it has stood as a symbol of truth, a beacon of liberty, and as a memorial to those who have given their lives for their beliefs. I do have to pause for a minute to thank Judith Walker-Riggs, as I have lifted at least a few sentences directly from her telling of this story.



North Texas Association of

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Unitarian Universalist Societies

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Jan Hus was a Czech priest ordained in 1401, inspired by the writings of English theologian John Wycliffe, (or like the street in Dallas, why-cliff) and was a Roman Catholic to his dying day, as well as a radical who laid much of the groundwork for Martin Luther and the Reformation. From his church in Prague, he preached, in the native language, on the issues of the day and of the morality and goodness of the people. He also passed the communion cup to the parishioners as well as the priests, implying that they might actually be equal. Revolutionary concepts, all of them.

This was quite threatening to the hierarchy, already in a period of strife when there were two, then three popes battling for control. To quell unrest, leaders banned all writings which questioned the Church; the books were to be burnt and the authors excommunicated. The archbishop himself came to read Hus' excommunication order; the congregation picked him up, robes, mitre and all, and tossed him out into the street, still pronouncing. King Wencelaus, brother of the Holy Roman Emperor, tried to mediate and walk the middle ground, but Hus was forced into exile in 1411.

His foes did not give up so easily. After gathering their evidence, they had Hus brought back from exile four years later. He was convicted in a trial where the odds were stacked against him, at the end of which, court officials ripped off his robes and tore from his hands a communion chalice, with the words "We take from thee the cup of redemption." Don't you love the drama! Before he was burnt at the stake, he made a pun on his name, which means 'goose' in Czech: "Today you may be burning a goose, but from my ashes will be born a swan which you will never kill." There we have the first flames for our chalice.

We religious liberals trace our heritage back to Hus, as well to Faustus Socinus, George de Benneville, and Michael Servetus; those roots are also integral to the founding of our own nation. After all, if we are to do away with the king's government, why should we keep his religion? Many leaders of the American Revolution were Unitarian or Universalist, in tendency if not affiliation. Most of us know of John and Abigail Adams, but how many know that Paul Revere also shared our faith, and that Benjamin Franklin had Unitarian leanings? Had Thomas Jefferson lived in New England, he probably would have identified as Unitarian. How many know of Benjamin Rush, Universalist physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence, who introduced the groundwork for modern mental health care?

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From more recent times, how about Ida Cannon, trailblazer who established the field of medical social work, and the case-management method? Or Leland Stanford, who with his wife Jane, founded that little ol' school out in California? Remember Horace Greeley, who advised, "Go west, young man"? And we can't forget P.T. Barnum, who bamboozled his way into America's pocketbooks.

We honor John Murray and Judith Sargent Murray, whose congregation in Gloucester won the first ruling in this country for religious liberty, 1786, exempting them from paying taxes to support the parish church, the majority church of the state which also ran the schools? If we had the same system here, Southern Baptists might be in charge of Texas schools, and we would pay our taxes directly to them. Legal scholars will also recognize the Dedham Case, when the parish, or townspeople, disagreed with the congregation, those who attended church, over the choice of minister, prompting a dispute over who owned the property; the decision was another cornerstone in the separation of church and state. As the saying goes, they kept the building and we kept the faith. And in the 1830's, decades after the revolution, Abner Kneeland was convicted of blasphemy, and served sixty days when he declared he did not believe in the god of the Universalist church. Unitarians and Universalists have long been in the middle of U.S. legal history, often on opposing sides.

Horace Mann for many years chaired the Massachusetts school board, which modeled a public school system and set many education standards for the rest of the nation. Clara Barton founded the American Red Cross, Susan B. Anthony worked tirelessly for women's suffrage, and Dorothea Dix championed the cause of modern mental health care. Literature shelves are crowded with UU's too numerous to mention. Theodore Parker was one of many UU abolitionists while Senators Daniel Webster and John C. Calhoun fought and compromised to maintain the union and prevent the Civil War; Thomas Starr King was instrumental in keeping California in that Union. And in a lovely twist of irony, Samuel Morse invented the telegraph, Alexander Graham Bell came up with some talking machine, and Tim Berners-Lee actually gets the credit for inventing Al Gore's internet. (I'd say we've got communication covered there.) All of these people- Unitarian, Universalist, or both.

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Our UU history is interwoven with our nation's past, with many firsts and founders among our numbers- so why don't we have more and larger congregations? 5% of Who's Who in America identifies as UU, yet we are one-tenth of one percent of the general population. Jefferson was convinced that the population would convert within a generation, and two hundred years ago claimed that "there is not a young man now living in the U.S. who will not die a Unitarian." So what went happened? Part of my response is that we don't offer short, easy answers to life's difficult questions, which is itself a short, easy answer.

Another part of the answer is in the saying that Unitarians of years past kept their churches hidden and reserved for those determined and intelligent enough to find them, while the Universalists didn't build the institutions that would last. There's truth in each. After all, who doesn't remember the stories of Quillen Shinn, the eighteenth-century circuit rider who founded churches throughout the south? Don't you recall the missionaries who came to West Texas in the 1840's? Oh that's right, those churches didn't last. Yes, there were Universalist churches in Texas at the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; and they didn't limit their social action efforts to the standard causes of the day. In the Nineteenth Century, they support equal pay equal work- a little ahead of their time?

This is not to say Universalists could not build institutions. After all, Tufts University is still going strong. In Boston, Hosea Ballou preached at Second Universalist for thirty-four years, and built the church to several thousand members. His writings such as *A Treatise on Atonement* helped establish Universalist theology. Though he did not believe in free will, he was unitarian (with a small u) instead of trinitarian, asserting that Jesus' role was to reconcile humanity to God, not to soothe a wrathful God angry at human sin and excess.

Besides being resistant to anything resembling 'proselytizing' we also have a tendency to be quite stingy with our dollars, living in genteel poverty and giving just enough to keep the church going, but not enough to really make it thrive. And yes, we do have money- among the highest per capita income in this country, but nearly dead last in giving.

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That's why Laurel Hallman started preaching about 'five percent' when she arrived in Dallas twenty-two years ago, about giving to create the institution we dream of and envision. Before that, new members would meet with a committee member who, when asked about giving, would include the minimum pledge level, and that's what often was committed. Instead of even mentioning minimum levels, she talked about the ideal of 5%, half a tithe; it's only half because you are presumably also giving to your other causes. 5% was even the theme of the canvass a last year, with a logo that looked like the 'five' key on your keyboard. And it's worked- in the past two decades, the average pledge has nearly quadrupled, while membership has doubled.

There have been other highs and lows in the history of First Unitarian. Founded in 1899, it grew steadily for three decades, outgrowing assorted rental spaces and its first building. One high point was on February 20, 1921, when Rabindranath Tagore, first Indian to win the Nobel Prize, spoke. Betsy Yost, who died recently, was a child then and remembered his sandals and flowing white robes, unusual even for today's downtown Dallas. The recorded estimate puts the crowd at six hundred people, with another five hundred outside; I'm a bit doubtful we had a building that would hold that many, as average Sunday attendance was around one hundred. A smaller crowd showed up in '24 when the English scientist Julian Huxley spoke, and only two hundred had to be turned away. In that tradition of speeches by major figures of the day, whom should we invite next?

But tougher times were ahead. In the spring of '26, the minister took ill and died after a couple of month. Two years into the Great Depression, the congregation had to shut its doors; we had been very dependent on a few generous individuals, and when they fell on hard times, the institution nearly collapsed. Hardy Sanders, a pillar of the church until his death a few years ago, helped us learn from this lesson; though very generous, he and Betty often gave in challenge grants to inspire others to give freely. For seven years, it was the Women's Alliance which held things together, until meetings started again at Scott Hall, north of downtown, in 1938.

The 1940's and 50's, the era of McCarthyism and the Cold War, were a time of sustained growth for the church, though not without adversity. The FBI monitored our telephones, and Minute Women attended services to take notes on the sermons. We grew in spite of, and because of, such challenges, because the preacher, Robert Raible, did not give up. I'll have more to say on that in a minute.

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After Daddy Bob's retirement in '64, we had some tough years at a time when Dallas really needed a strong liberal presence- remember that this city was the stronghold of the John Birch Society, where Adlai Stevenson was attacked by an opponent of the UN, and 'the city that killed Kennedy.' Lyssa Jenkins, now a member of First Church, tells that her Fifth-grade classmates erupted in cheers upon hearing that the president had been assassinated. We were often a lonely voice for liberalism, yet we went on.

To succeed Daddy Bob, we first chose Paul Carnes, who had to decline the call because of illness. Fortunately, he recovered and went on to be president of the UUA for three years. Jim Wilkes was a former priest who wasn't ready for UU ministry; while he had discarded Christian theology, he tried to run First U like a Roman Catholic church. You can imagine how that went over. For that reason and others, we had to let him go after two and a half years. After a good run under Dwight Brown, there was another minister who was not a good fit and only stayed two years, evidence that an 80% vote is not enough when calling a minister.

Social Action presented challenges in the '80's, with deep disagreement over the Sanctuary Movement and being a Nuclear Free zone; the congregational meeting for that vote included some nasty name-calling. We forgot the covenant for a while, but we went on.

There was also high turnover and experimentation in the RE department. at one lock-in, a youth even pulled a knife; the advisor couldn't deal with it and left the building- that's one reason we now have at least two adults with each group. Let us not forget the cave: the youth used to meet in the basement room under the sanctuary, their decopauge still covers the air ducts overhead, and there might still be a few 'fumes of the weed' in the woodwork.

And in his charge to our current minister, John Buehrens said that when he arrived in August of '81, half the staff had been laid off, there was \$3000 in the bank, and that each and every one of the skylights in the sanctuary leaked- there were buckets everywhere. He had to type his own orders of service until a church member volunteered. Thankfully, things are better now, as we go on.

It is so important that we do go on, to be a presence. Out on the West Coast, you might be asked **If** or **Why** you go to church, while the question here is **Where** you go to church. And if you don't, you are often stigmatized or isolated- like many of you, I NEED my church.

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Then the stories that I have been around for. Remember, I've only been a member for twenty-two years.

Tom Irvin was a loyal and dedicated member, singing in the choir as well as serving on the board, and as organist on a volunteer basis, for seven years. When he became ill in the late 80's, the church stepped forward. Board members brought him meals and scrubbed his kitchen floor; Alice Horn did his laundry (she probably didn't do her own) and mending with her own hands, as her testament to her friend. The nurses were amazed that he did not enter the hospital until his last two weeks, but it was his caregroup of **165 people** who made that possible. Towards the end, we suffered through some pretty awful hymn-playing, but we were tolerant because Tom's music was one of the things keeping him alive. Remembering him and others, we go on.

Louise Raggio has been another pillar of the church, with an amazing story also told in a Channel 13 feature. She and husband Greer had moved to Dallas shortly after WWII, and found First Unitarian. In the pulpit was a preacher, who according to her conservative Lutheran upbringing, was saying things that were going to land him in hell. They stayed. That support network proved vital when Greer was fired from the federal government for being a suspected communist, though neither one of them could talk about what was going on. Daddy Bob and Rabbi Levi Olan were the only two clergy in town who did not stop preaching against the witchhunts; as she tells it, these men, both small physically, would shake their fists and declare, "This is wrong!"

Greer was soon rehired, though he left as soon as he was able to start his own law firm, and would do civil liberties work throughout the 50's. In November of 63, he got a call from ACLU in Washington, DC asking him to represent someone named Lee Harvey Oswald. Because everyone deserves representation, he went; Louise insisted he not go alone, so a couple of church members escorted him to that first and only hearing.

Meanwhile, Louise earned her law degree and after only a couple of years of job-hunting, was the first woman to work in the DA's office as a lawyer. She went on to be the first female president of the state bar foundation, (not a position where you get elected if you don't show up to the meeting) and used that position to change the state property laws; until 1967, a married woman could not sign a contract or even open a checking account, and she, as a partner in a law firm, had to ask her husband to sign papers. She tells of lobbying, at the same time others were pushing for an equal rights

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amendment. They had irked one legislator, who asked Louise if she was with 'those other women.' She replied that she wasn't, and he declared, "That's good enough for me; you've got my vote." Just one of our beloved activists, and a treasured part of our congregation.

And then there was December of '91. On Sunday morning, it was announced that the ministerial intern was leaving early; he was not ready for ministry. That afternoon, it was discovered that a former treasurer of the church, the trustee heading up long-range planning, had taken his own life. The next day, the niece of one of our members was one of four girls murdered in an Austin store. The minister certainly earned every penny of her salary that week.

It was also that week that the president of the congregation gave birth, and on Thursday, showed her daughter off to board members who had gathered so they could process Rick's death. On the following Sunday, as we dedicated a new chalice, Laurel wove together the human life-cycle with bits of history as she preached *Infant Hope and Steady Light*. And we went on.

In December 1999, we returned to Temple Emanu-el, our first meeting place, for the centennial worship service. We counted this time, and there were 875 attending. Membership is now pushing 1100, and we have three ministers on staff, along with lots of other folks to the point that we are having to get creative about where people can work. If there's space for a desk and a chair, it's an office. The roof isn't an option- yet; first we'll try closets and the boiler room- it's why we have started work on the new wing for offices and classrooms- just think- FIVE of them for Adult RE! In January we installed Daniel Kanter as Senior Minister, with about six hundred people in a sanctuary that can seat five hundred if we get REAL cozy, and in May called Aaron White as a minister, with a vote of **351-0**. Unanimous- can you believe it? We have not lost members with Laurel Hallman's retirement, and I think we are poised to start another growth spurt. Most exciting is the Center for Public Dialog, through which we want to foster interfaith conversations for the metro area. And we'll go on.

Finally, I am not in favor of growth just to be big. Instead, larger numbers tell that we are reaching people who need to hear the word, people who are desperate for the good news of Unitarian Universalism. But that's another sermon. Let me just reiterate: I am not for growth just for growth's sake, but that growth is a natural outcome for an effective and healthy congregation.

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I sometimes hear folks say that they are opposed to growth- well, if you aren't growing, you're dying. Members will pass away and move away, and if new people aren't joining, your numbers will eventually shrink. 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 small-church behavior, where a few people control everything. If you do find yourself in a large congregation and want to make connections, please, join a group of some kind, any kind- you will not make strong connections just during coffee hour. 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?

So I close with a question and a challenge- I ask you to listen to each other as you tell the stories of what this congregation has been and done, what it has meant to you and to this community, and I want you to share your dreams of what this congregation can be.

closing words by **John Murray #704**

**Go into the highways and by-ways,  
give the people something of your new vision.**

**You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine;  
use it in order to bring more light and understanding  
to the hearts and minds of men and women.**

**Give them not hell but hope and courage;  
preach the kindness and everlasting love of god.**