

Measures of Membership

The work of the Alban Institute's Loren Mead has helped to establish a framework for considering membership questions in this report. Mead builds on the work of Ted Buckle in suggesting that there are four distinct dynamics to church growth: numerical growth, maturational growth, organic growth, and incarnational growth.

Although a definition of *numerical growth* might be obvious, it is somewhat problematic. Congregation rolls are notoriously unreliable. The Alban Institute suggests that attendance at worship and Sunday school, pledges collected, and involvement and presence are far better measures of membership than numbers of members. Even at the level of simple counting and accounting, issues of commitment and participation come into play. Whatever numbers are used to measure numerical growth, the conclusion is inevitable. In Mead's words, "Any human institution that does not develop an effective method of recruiting new membership (and leadership) will die. There are no exceptions."¹ Numerical growth is the way a healthy institution maintains itself so that it can continue to act out its mission in the world.

Maturational growth refers to the experience of individuals as they are transformed by membership. Mead suggests an increase in maturity of faith, a deepening spirituality, and an expansion of the religious imagination as the markers of maturational growth. He defines religious imagination as that which allows a person to see life as a complex array of choices, rather than a simple yes-or-no question.

The third type of growth is *organic growth*. Mead draws on systems theory in order to understand the congregation as a living system whose structures must constantly change and adapt to the inputs (new members, more mature members) in order to sustain growth. Mead describes it as the intentional creation of community, an essential goal of congregational leadership: “Organic growth is about the task of building the community, fashioning the organizational structures, developing the processes and practices that result in a dependable, stable network of human relationships in which we can grow and from which we can make a difference.”² Struggling with how to achieve organic growth raises several thorny issues that the Commission believes congregations will have to struggle with. We don’t advocate particular “one size fits all” answers to these questions. Our goal is to raise the issues and provide background on how congregational leadership might frame their own particular answers.

The final form of growth is *incarnational growth*. This is about going out into the community and “enfleshing” its values. Incarnational growth addresses the relationship between a particular congregation and its environment. It is grounded in the other forms of growth—it cannot occur over a sustained period of time without the supportive internal structures and the mature and committed participation of a critical mass of members. Simply stated, incarnational growth is about how we live out our faith in the world.

In the context of Mead’s model, growth is understood to be a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that is inseparable from the meaning of membership.

Quantity of Membership

That numbers count is a reality of contemporary Unitarian Universalism. It is impossible to discuss membership without addressing ways in which numbers are used: to measure growth and decline, both in the UUA and in individual congregations; to measure trends in various areas of the continent; to determine levels and types of services from the UUA; to establish Fair Share payments to districts and the UUA; to provide congregational statistics for reporting in the UUA and district directories and to outside publications. In addition, membership numbers are shared, contrasted, and compared by ministerial colleagues when discussing the vitality of their congregations, and they are a major descriptive feature of congregations, used, for example, in the ministerial search process when a congregation describes itself to potential ministers, both settled and interim.

The fact that various congregations count their constituencies in different ways complicates the issue of membership numbers and what they might mean. An informal Commission survey of membership in randomly selected congregations during 2000 revealed numerous ways to categorize members as well as friends. There are voting members, honorary voting members, active

members, out-of-town members, lifetime members, emerita/us members, inactive members, youth members, and student members, and this probably does not exhaust the list. Friends (usually people who participate in the life of the congregation but have chosen not to sign the membership book) are variously called pledging friends, contributing friends, newsletter friends, and RE friends. A further complication is that some congregations refer to pledging units while others count the full constituency (members, friends, those receiving the newsletter, plus children in the RE program), families affiliated with the congregation, attendance at worship, and the parish. Within our system of congregational polity there is a remarkable variety of ways to count membership or participation in congregations.

Current policy of the UUA uses number of members to determine a congregation's Fair Share assessment in support of both the Association and districts. One result of this practice is "updating" of membership lists, sometimes called weeding. There is a monetary incentive for keeping congregational membership numbers as low as possible when reporting to the UUA. The membership number used in conversations can be twice the number reported. This raises serious ethical as well as financial concerns.

One such concern relates to people who are unable to pay the pledges commonly expected as a condition of membership. Many congregations have established special categories for such people, who may be elderly, disabled, or in a financial crisis. The category may be assigned as a special tribute for long or exceptional membership participation over time; it may involve asking a minister or congregation official to waive any financial requirement. Individuals in the latter category may be embarrassed to ask for special consideration and choose to resign rather than be perceived as not self-supporting. Unitarian Universalists have a reputation for being fiercely independent in their theology and their social views, and this sense of independence can be expected to manifest itself in attitudes about paying one's own way. People who choose formal resignation or quiet disappearance may be deprived of community, needed services, pastoral care, and/or spiritual growth. It is entirely possible that there's a quiet feeling of coercion in the decision to resign or leave, even if none is intended. To what extent should membership depend on the ability to pay for it?

It would be naïve to suggest that a congregation can exist without dependable income. Nonetheless, if we seriously intend to be economically diverse, there must be ways to readjust the relationship between membership and money.

Two significant questions raised here are

- What are the fairest and most responsible ways to balance the ideal of the congregation as a caring and compassionate community with congregation as a viable economic entity?

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- By what formula should congregations support the UUA and its districts so that there is no perceived advantage in keeping membership numbers low?

In his report to the General Assembly in 2000, UUA financial advisor Lawrence (Larry) Ladd writes, “Our community of faith continues to grow. We are growing in numbers, in generosity, and in congregational resources.”³ Using 1985 as a reference point for comparison, Ladd presents these figures for 2000:

- Membership: 154,459, up 10.9 percent
- Religious education enrollment: 61,165, up 56.8 percent
- Combined adult membership and RE enrollment: 215,624, up 21 percent

He observes that growth in RE enrollments generally exceeds the growth in membership.⁴ Subsequently, using figures from the consolidation of the American Unitarian Association (AUA) and the Universalist Church in America (UCA) in 1961, Ladd reports, “We grew substantially in the Sixties, declined in the Seventies, and have been making slow, steady progress since 1982.”⁵

Several times Ladd cautions that some data is suspect, and for several reasons. One of those reasons is the variety of ways in which congregations count their members. But as he also comments, the data “is the best we have.”⁶ One observation from the data with which he seems comfortable is that the number of congregations has remained fairly constant since 1961—around one thousand. Some congregations have been born; some have died.

One additional graph in the financial advisor’s report shows combined UUA membership and RE enrollment as a percentage of the U.S. population. The report apparently does not include Canada in the total population but may include Canadian Unitarian Universalists in the UUA number. This data shows the highest percentage (0.14 percent) between 1967 and 1970, and a fairly constant 0.08 percent between 1980 and 1997, the most recent year included in the graph. A possible interpretation of this data is that growth in numbers (adult and RE) has resulted in “holding our own” relative to general U.S. population growth. Ladd contends, “We should be proud of our growth. We should be dissatisfied with the modesty of that growth given our potential.”⁷

It might be interesting to compare our numbers with those of various other faith communities over a given period of time, or to compare the average age of members, were this data available. Numbers have many uses in assessment and planning, but inconsistency in both counting and interpretation makes their significance uncertain.

Robert D. Putnam writes in *Bowling Alone*, “Denominational membership figures are debatable because denominations vary in the strictness of their def-

initiation of membership, membership figures are only irregularly updated, self-reports may be inflated, and not all churches keep or report accurate records. Poll data avoid some of these drawbacks but generally record higher membership figures than the ecclesiastical records, probably because many lapsed members continue to identify themselves as Presbyterian, or Jewish, or Catholic.”⁸ This observation meshes with often-cited poll data showing that many more people self-identify as Unitarian Universalists than can be accounted for in any UUA data.

To what extent and in what way does counting individual members of a congregation (or of the UUA) affect the identification of people with and participation in Unitarian Universalism? Looking at numbers alone focuses narrowly on only one category: legal membership, those who have formally signed the book and met any other requirements for membership in a given congregation. But we know that every congregation includes significant numbers of people who are affiliated, involved, supportive in many ways, but not legal members. Our theology of membership and inclusion requires that we concern ourselves with this broader constituency. The *quality* of membership is not necessarily reflected in numbers alone.

Membership is about deepening individuals’ connections with their congregations as well as encouraging their own spiritual journeys. It is about developing an understanding and theology of membership that renews individuals and our movement. To these ends, healthy membership theologies and practices must also concern themselves with what Loren Mead calls maturational, organic, and incarnational growth.

The quality of membership is not necessarily reflected in numbers alone.

Quality of Membership

People value memberships for both their intrinsic and their extrinsic worth. When the membership is in a religious community, however, the intrinsic, deep, and emotional components are, at their best, of greater significance than any others. They help members deal with the peaks and valleys of human experience. Consider the following comments offered in UU churches during the Joys and Sorrows portion of the service:

I thank everyone who offered me support last spring when I told you I’d be starting treatment for breast cancer. Things went well for quite some time, but I saw my doctor this past week, and it’s not so good. I need your love and encouragement again.

I found it very powerful to share my joy about C_____ in church (Unitarian Universalist) and receive so much responds [sic]. It was positively overwhelming to experience such a strong and supporting community.

Comments such as these, publicly expressed, reflect the high quality of congregation membership/friend status experienced by the speakers. They have found in their congregational connections what people hope to receive from religiously based organizations: support, acknowledgment, affirmation, caring, response. Ideally, these qualities are an outgrowth of the theological underpinnings of that religious expression. Similar responses can be found in any group whose members care about one another, but there is a special quality within the religious community that crosses lines of race, ethnicity, politics, social status, sexual orientation, or any other demographic that brings people together in communities or organizations for varying periods of time.

What happens to the quality of congregation membership when conflicts arise, as they invariably do whenever human beings are together over time? The sources of these conflicts are common, familiar, all too frequent, and by no means limited to Unitarian Universalists: Should we buy the building next door to expand the church school? Sell the parsonage? Fire the minister? Use mugs or styrofoam cups at coffee hour? Become a Welcoming Congregation? Redesign readings to use inclusive language? Use weed killer on the lawn? Spend extra money on ourselves or on others?

Internal conflicts, often called church politics, are frequently cited as the reason people cut their pledges or resign their memberships in a particular congregation. Are they experiencing what is called elsewhere in this report first disillusionment? Are they astonished that people in *this* congregation could disagree with them on matters either significant or trivial? How is disagreement handled? Are Unitarian Universalists more prone than other religious organizations to experience conflict or to have drastic results when members hold different points of view?

There have been a number of studies of conflict in religious organizations. Wade Clark Roof, in his 1978 book *Community and Commitment*, wrote that liberal congregations may be more conflict-prone because they are more democratic.⁹ In 1993 Penny Edgell Becker et al. found at least some conflicts resulting from a division between older and newer members.¹⁰

Over a period of 18 months in the early 1990s Becker interviewed 231 people from 23 congregations: 203 lay members and 28 clergy. In addition, she attended worship services and meetings and reviewed printed documents such as annual reports, mission statements, constitutions, written histories, promotional brochures, and sermons. This is how she describes a community she calls Pleasantdale, the location of the study: population about 50,000, 18 percent black, 77 percent white; largely a community of young professionals in professional families; known in academic and policy circles for “achieving stable racial integration in the early 1970s”;¹¹ known for being progressive. She collected data in 2 synagogues, 2 Catholic parishes, and 19 Protestant congregations in Pleasantdale and 2 adjacent, smaller communities. One of the congregations was Unitarian Universalist, described as large (more than 150

regular Sunday/Sabbath attenders, with administration divided into boards and committees). Among her findings were the following:

Liberal congregations were the only ones to fight about inclusive language and becoming “open and affirming,” while conservative congregations had the only conflicts over premarital or extramarital sex. There were no other differences in what liberal and conservative churches fought over.

More of the serious conflicts, with members leaving and resolution elusive, were in liberal congregations. The size and polity of a congregation did not influence the kinds of issues bringing conflict.

Regarding the amount of conflict: There were twenty-nine conflicts in small congregations, thirty-six in large ones, thirty-one in liberal, and thirty-four in conservative.¹²

Congregational Models

Becker worked with four organizational models in her study: congregation as *family*, as *community*, as *leader*, and as *house of worship*. All four models agree that worship and religious education are the core tasks of a congregation; these are the only core tasks specified in her house-of-worship model. The family model means the whole congregation is close, family-like. The congregation-as-community model agrees with the family model but adds, “Adopt policies that express members’ values and interpretations on social issues” and substitutes “closeness and familylike within small groups” for having the whole congregation be family-like.¹³ Congregations operating on the leader model do not consider closeness as a core task. Rather, they emphasize adopting official policies or pastor’s guidelines on social issues and being a leader in the community and beyond.

Not surprisingly, Becker found four of the congregations were “mixed”: a Missouri Synod Lutheran, a Catholic, an Episcopalian, and the Unitarian Universalist. When conflict developed in these congregations, the results were intense:

Mixed congregations are the only ones where conflict raged through a series of events, and where resolution was virtually impossible without the exit of one of the groups that had been mobilized. Formal rules were invoked and votes taken, but to little avail, as the conflict erupted again. The governance structure of the congregation was questioned openly in three of these congregations, and in one was under a process of review and revision during the conflict.¹⁴

The specific conflict Becker identified in the UU congregation was between a group preferring a family model and a newer group preferring a leader model.

Later, Becker comments, “Members can identify the bundle of things that matter to them about their local congregation, and they orient their behavior to these locally institutionalized ideas about ‘who we are.’ When challenged, members can clearly articulate their preference for a certain style of congregation, and they are very conscious that a victory for the other side means their congregation will turn into a place that is in many ways less representative of their values.”¹⁵

Managing Change

Change is never easy, and it’s often disruptive. Whenever new people become part of an established congregation, they understandably bring with them their values and perceptions. If they have been told they will be accepted as they are, what do they understand this to mean? If they are more conservative, or more liberal, than the current culture of the congregation, how can they express their differences? Can they rightly expect that the culture will change to reflect their views to a greater degree? How do longer-time members respond? Are *they* right in thinking the new people want to change the very institution and values that attracted them in the first place? When significant change occurs, what is an appropriate response to the person who says sadly, “This isn’t the congregation I joined. I no longer feel comfortable here”? Becker found this as a conflict flash point in her study.

Can it be generalized from Becker’s work and from the Commission questionnaire that, for whatever reasons, UUs find it especially difficult to manage conflict? Does Unitarian Universalism in its contemporary form attract people of deeply held views who find sharing or compromise difficult if not impossible? When their views are challenged, do they feel under attack as individuals? Are they in fact under attack? Are Unitarian Universalists in general truly “liberal,” using the definition “generous of spirit”? These are significant issues affecting an individual’s deepest feelings of belonging, of being a member of a religious community.

Another question: To what extent are these divisive issues of a religious nature, to what degree are they social/societal, and how much are they mixed? In recent years there has been considerable activity in the UU world regarding diversity. To the extent that this diversity reflects differences of race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, or other societal differences, there appears to be an improving comfort level, although much work remains. However, to the extent that differences are in *religious practice*, incorporating religious expressions outside conventional Western religious tradition for example, or at variance with the culture of a given congregation at a particular time, these

differences can be viewed as divergent, as proceeding in different directions religiously. In congregations with Buddhist or pagan or similar groups, to the extent the participants are also part of the ongoing life of the congregation, they are generally accepted. To the extent participants are not otherwise involved in the life of the congregation, the group is sometimes viewed as taking advantage of a free meeting space and questions arise as to whether this is appropriate. The issue came up in private conversations with respondents to the Commission questionnaire and with members of responding congregations but comments were not committed to paper. These issues, too, affect perceptions of the *quality* of membership.

A further question: Is it possible that, within the UU world, promises are made that cannot be fulfilled? When a newcomer hears, “You are accepted as you are,” what does that mean? Who accepts? What are the limits of what is acceptable? What is required of the person seeking acceptance? *People* make promises; *people* fulfill them. Institutions can do neither. If promises are made or implied that require others to *do* something, to what extent is an obligation also implied? How an individual reacts to such an implication of obligation is another aspect of the quality of membership. Is this within the free church tradition and operational mode of congregational polity in which Unitarian Universalism has its roots?

UUA financial advisor Larry Ladd, in his verbal report to the UUA General Assembly in 2000, spoke of the importance of a “clear religious message” to congregation growth.¹⁶ What *is* a clear religious message? What is the clear *religious* message of contemporary Unitarian Universalism? Who expresses it? How is it heard and interpreted? How and when can these questions be answered, and by whom?

No matter its size, a congregation whose members treat one another with gentleness and respect and that has a good idea of how it fits into its time and place as well as its future, will provide the quality of membership that reduces the revolving-door syndrome, makes people want to join, and affirms the best that Unitarian Universalism represents.

Notes

1. Loren B. Mead, *More Than Numbers: The Way Churches Grow* (Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1993), 16.
2. *Ibid.*, 60.
3. Lawrence Ladd, Financial Advisor’s Report to the UUA General Assembly, Nashville, TN, June 2000, 3.
4. *Ibid.*, 4.
5. *Ibid.*, 5.
6. *Ibid.*, 6.

7. Ibid., 7.
8. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 69.
9. Wade Clark Roof, *Community and Commitment* (New York: Elsevier, 1978).
10. Penny Egell Becker et al., "Congregational Models and Conflict: A Study of How Institutions Shape Organizational Process" in N. J. Demerath, III, et al., eds., *Sacred Companies: Organizational Aspects of Religion and Religious Aspects of Organizations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 231–55.
11. Ibid., 234.
12. Ibid., 235.
13. Ibid., 237.
14. Ibid., 245.
15. Ibid., 246.
16. Ladd, op. cit., 15.