

UUA Association Sunday

By Sally Carroll

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Visalia
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The Shakers originated in 1772 and grew by the next century to have some 200,000 converts. Strict believers in celibacy, they maintained their numbers through conversion and the adoption of orphans into their communes. When boys reached the age of 21, they were given the option of staying to accept the celibate life, or going their own way. Turnover was very high. Today their numbers have dwindled to a handful of members living in Maine.

Now one wouldn't think that UU s would have much in common with such a strict Christian sect. Unitarianism and Universalism both got started at about the same time as the Shakers, and both reached their highest membership in the mid-1800s. Universalists, who were always more evangelistic than Unitarians, grew to 500,000 strong by the 1850s. But like the shakers, the membership dwindled over the next hundred years. At the time of our merger in 1961, Universalists numbered only 68,000.

Our membership continued to wane during the 1970s as liberal activists found their energies put into political outlets. We're not down to a handful. For the past twenty or so years our denomination has grown about 1 percent a year. We went from 1035 congregations to 1042. Our membership is now about 220,000. It should be noted that many churches have regular attendees who for various reasons, some of them financial, have not officially joined.

But during that time the national population has grown by about 50 percent. So even though our actual numbers are increasing slightly, we have a decreasing slice of the pie. The average size of UU congregations is 100. The average age is 55. Alas, like the Shakers, we have a hard time hanging on to our youth. We retain only 10% of our children. We are a movement, like the Shakers, who have always relied on drawing our membership from newcomers.

Fifteen of our churches account for one quarter of our growth. About 6 percent of our congregations gave us two-thirds of our new members. The others are stuck or are in decline. Ours is a movement where small, often scarcely visible congregations predominate. In most American cities, the average citizen may not ever have heard of Unitarian Universalism.

And yet, we know there are hundreds of thousands of people in America who are looking for a liberal religious community. We have -- well maybe not this church -- but many churches have 1000s of visitors each year. Just out of curiosity, how many vistor's have come here this year? Do we have any members who were raised as UU s? You are a rare breed. My youngest daughter was raised by a UU mother, but for many years we did not attend any church. My five other kids rejected Unitarian Universalism for various other paths: Christian, Mormon, secular Atheism. Do your teens or young adults attend? This perhaps should be the topic of another sermon, but today I would like to focus on the visitors.

Do you remember the first time you attended a UU church? What were you seeking? What did you find? And what caused you to come back? (discussion)

In this day and age, we have cell phones and internet and instant messaging and call waiting. We all see people who walk and drive and eat with a cell phone stuck to their ear.

And yet -- did you know-- almost half of all Americans claim to have either only one or sometimes no one with whom they can discuss important matters. This number has almost doubled over the past twenty years. One quarter of American addresses today have only one person living there. Humans are social beings. We need community the way we need food and shelter. Yet we have created a society that isolates us. We don't live in tiny communities where everyone knows each other. We don't mingle with our neighbors much. Reconnecting is a role that churches of all denominations must play.

So there is a very good chance that the visitors that come to our UU churches are disconnected people who are seeking connections. Says Peter Morales: "They are looking for relationships with people who share their values. They are starving for true community -- for religious community. They are people who are seeking to transcend the soul-destroying banality of consumer society. They want the depth and meaning that comes from being faithful to a vision that transcends their lives. They want to sing together and worship together. They want to join with others to work for change and to bear witness to an image of human life that involves compassion and stewardship of the web of life...They are searching for a place where kindness, understanding and acceptance are taught -- a place to join with others in raising their kids. They know it takes a village to raise a child. They come to us hoping we will be that village...[They] do not come to debate theology or politics...[They] come...to see how our church *feels* to them. The key question is emotional and spiritual, not intellectual. The real question, often not completely articulated in their minds, is: "Are these my people? Do I truly belong here?"

Now, I personally have been to a number of UU Churches in my life, and they generally have a greeter or two at the front door. Someone to stick a name tag on the visitor, point out a pamphlet, give a friendly smile. But all too often, there's little follow through during or after the service. You guys have a pretty good set up with the potlucks - a good place to mingle, if you make it a point to do so. But I've noticed that not many newcomers stay. Have you ever wondered why? (discussion) Perhaps their schedules don't permit, or perhaps they feel shy about not bringing food to share, or perhaps they just didn't quite feel that critical connection.

"It's important to realize," continues Morales, "that each visitor is a vulnerable human being who is reaching out. True hospitality is a spiritual practice. It comes from deep inside. Religious hospitality is more than being superficially friendly. Religious hospitality involves being open to the dreams and the pain of each visitor...For you and me to ignore a visitor is the moral equivalent of not feeding the hungry and not housing the homeless."

Now, granted, it is important to find a balance between being welcoming and stalking. The emphasis should be on being open and compassionate, more aware, less self-centered, less huddling with the folks we already know, less distracted by all the little details of church business that clutter our conversations before and after the services. I know how it is.

Religious hospitality is embodied in the sharing of Joys and Sorrows in our liturgy. At some other UU churches a time of Greeting Each Other is also a part of the liturgy. It works best when people actually rise from their seats and make a point of doing more than saying hi, or shaking hands, especially when it comes to newcomers. This becomes harder the larger you grow, but none-the-less important. The more members who practice spiritual hospitality the better. And remember that it doesn't end after the benediction. UU s are building community with covenant groups, with Building Your Own Theology groups, with social action groups, and believe it or not -- with work parties. There's nothing like sweat equity to build ownership of a congregation. I came to this place, just as I came to Sepulveda UU and Studio City UU with the intention of being involved, even for a short while, because I know that I am part of a larger UU community.

“True hospitality” says Morales, “includes creating a space for the newcomer in ... worship, in religious education, in small groups, in social action, in leadership, in music. A true religious hospitality invites the newcomer to share her gifts.”

Openness to others should be the practice of our religion just the way seeking social justice is. The spiritually hungry and the religiously homeless need us. People put off by traditional religion need us. They need us and we need them. Don't we have a responsibility to let them know we exist?

Even in Bible-belt Visalia, I'm sure there are people who would welcome Unitarian Universalism. I live in an apartment complex that has young families and college age tenants, but I don't see anyone getting up early on Sunday or dressed to go out to church. For every church bustling with people, there seem to be an equal number of people who consider church-going irrelevant. Surely some of them would welcome a non-traditional liberal religion. How does one reach out to them? How do we show our relevance to their lives? We won't suit everyone. One of our members was disappointed that a woman she invited walked out as soon as we read our affirmation. But I hope she doesn't stop reaching out to people, taking the risk. We should all be willing to do the same.

UUA President William Sinkford has said, “Now is the time for us to live up to the promise of our liberal religion, to let the world know we are here, to welcome those who seek our community of peace, justice and love. Now is the time for our congregations to grow stronger and more effective because our religious values are sorely needed to help heal a wounded world.”