

**Other Impediments to Growth:
How Reliance on a Learned Clergy Keeps Us Small and Non-ambitious –
A personal and institutional essay**

by Rev. Thom Belote

During my final year as a seminarian at Harvard Divinity School (2002-2003) I authored a brief thesis on the subject of Unitarian Universalist growth. My paper focused on the Dallas/Ft. Worth metro-plex growth plan and the process and planning behind the attempt at a large church plant which would later be known as “Pathways.” I wondered about the prospects of a UU “mega-church.” Truth be told, my research was neither groundbreaking nor revolutionary. Several other things took precedence for me, primarily the very real pressure of securing employment upon graduation. I was in the search process.

My classmates at Harvard asked me, upon hearing about my thesis topic, if I was about to start the first UU mega-church? The reality was that I was an earnest, visionary, energetic, enthusiastic young man who would accept a call to a congregation in suburban Kansas City that had ambitions to grow, but that had held steady at 175 to 200 members for over a decade while the suburban sprawl rushed past. This congregation has grown over the past three years: ten percent, fifteen percent, twenty percent, more. We have also struggled from the anxiety and strain of breaking through the pastoral-size plateau and transforming our church into a program-sized congregation.

Myths of why Unitarian Universalism isn’t growing

Currently, growth is a hot topic in Unitarian Universalist circles. There is a lot of discussion about why we have not been growing.

One piece of conventional wisdom says that we do not grow because **we lack a compelling theology**. According to this perspective, our movement lacks a message that is “purpose-driven.” Those who make these claims suggest that our message is fuzzy, ambiguous, or irrelevant. We do not speak directly to people’s lives, to the issues with which people struggle. We lack clarity. We do not possess a theology that transforms lives.

The lack of theology that a large segment of the population would find meaningful may indeed be a contributing factor, but it is not in itself a satisfactory explanation. Assuming this criticism is dead-on accurate, we cannot deny the fact that even though we may lack a compelling theology or powerful message, our movement is at least powerful enough to attract and hold the 150,000+ UU adults who are a part of our movement. I do not believe we have saturated the market of those who feel drawn to a theology that allows for ambiguity, a map by which to embark on one’s own spiritual journey that is read through a glass darkly, and an expectation that each member will “build their own theology.” I can imagine that this would hold an appeal for hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Americans. It probably wouldn’t appeal to tens of millions, but it wouldn’t have to. Even if the most disparaging things that are said about our theology were true, and I do not believe that they are, there would still be room to grow. Hundreds of clergy and thousands of laypeople commit their lives to Unitarian Universalism. They are committing to something rather than nothing. And that something, whatever it is, certainly has a wider appeal than is currently manifest.

A second piece of conventional wisdom claims that we do not grow because **we do not welcome and integrate seekers**. This criticism, like the previous one, contains a seed of truth. Those who critique our lack of welcome express these criticisms in a variety of ways: We do not advertise. We do not invite our friends to church. We hide our “light” under the proverbial bushel basket. We keep our faith and religious affiliation a secret. Our churches locate in out-of-the-way places, do not look like churches, and suggest by their architecture and landscaping that they are closed-off and distant. When visitors do take the risk to come in, they are not welcomed but treated coldly. It is a mystery as to how get involved and connected. Our churches don’t have effective mechanisms to integrate seekers. “It’s not that we don’t attract visitors; it’s that we don’t keep them,” says one piece of wisdom.

The claim that many Unitarian Universalist congregations are deficient in the welcome that they extend seems unfortunately accurate. I do not doubt that our congregations would be significantly larger if we made “radical hospitality” a central focus. However, it seems to me that even if we transformed our congregations into inviting communities, the growth potential this would generate would be significant but not extraordinary.

A third piece of conventional wisdom claims that we do not grow because **we are not financially generous**. It is popular to point out that UUs are at the bottom of giving in terms of percentage of income, even though we are at the top in terms of household income. The logic of this criticism suggests that our tightness with money prevents us from adequately funding our vision, and prevents us from growing.

This, too, is an accurate criticism. I do believe that our reluctance to fund our congregations impedes our growth significantly. I might add that we need to look not only at how much money we give, but also what we do with the money that we receive. Accepting that we are limited in our finances – that we don’t have enough money to do everything we might want to – many of our church’s choices seem highly questionable from a growth perspective. In particular, it is my impression that many of our congregations choose aesthetics over spaciousness. Often, our spending does not prioritize acreage, parking capacity, seating capacity, and spacious foyers. We spend money on buildings that do not resemble big, rectangular boxes.

Yes, Unitarian Universalism struggles to articulate a compelling theology. We are less than optimally effective in reaching out to attract, welcome, and integrate those who seek a liberal religious community. We do not support our churches as adequately as we should. And yes, Unitarian Universalism would grow if we improved in these areas.

However, individually or in tandem, these three areas that conventional wisdom points to as stifling our growth do not sufficiently account for our not growing. The reality is, I think, much simpler. **We do not grow because we do not plant new churches.**

A simple exercise in imagination. Imagine that we had a magic growth pill that could grow every single Unitarian Universalist congregation to 1,000 members, which seems to be our upper-limit for church-size. Given approximately one-thousand congregations, that would mean about a million Unitarian Universalists. But, obviously, that magic pill wouldn’t work on every congregation. Rather than speak for the whole UUA, I’m going to only consider the churches in the Prairie Star District, assuming that this district is representative of the whole UUA. The 2004-2005 UUA directory lists 59 societies in Prairie Star with a total of approximately 7,700 members. If each

society were 1,000 members, that would be 59,000 members. But the magic pill won't work for every congregation. If you subtracted congregations that are lay-led fellowships, and those that are in a location that likely wouldn't demographically support a 1,000 member UU congregation, you are left with 20 out of 59 for whom the magic growth pill might work. And this number is very liberal. Of those 20 congregations, two (First Universalist in Minneapolis and Unity-Unitarian in St. Paul) are already essentially 1,000 members. That leaves 18, among them: Shawnee Mission, Wichita, and Topeka in Kansas; All Souls in Kansas City; Ames, Cedar Rapids, Des Moines, Iowa City, and Davenport in Iowa; both Omaha congregations and Lincoln in Nebraska; and First Unitarian in Minneapolis, White Bear, Rochester, Duluth, Bloomington, and Wayzata in Minnesota. Those 18 range in size from 125 members to 500 members. Let's say the average is 300 members. If each of those congregations took the magic pill and added (on average) 700 members to reach the 1,000 plateau, that would mean 12,600 new UUs. However, let's now assume the magic growth pill has only a 50% potency, which would still make it wildly successful. That would mean 6,300 new UUs in those fast growing congregations, or 80% growth in the district, assuming all of the other congregations maintained level membership on average.

Assuming that the Prairie Star District is fairly representative of most other UU districts, if one were to develop a magic growth pill that could grow 50% of "eligible" congregations to 1,000 members while all other congregations merely maintained their current membership, there would be about 275,000 Unitarian Universalists in the United States. This would have to be thought of as a best possible scenario for trying to add new wine to old wineskins.

If we were able to grow in this way it would be wonderful, but not enough. In order to grow, we need to start new churches. Unfortunately, with the exception of the two new intentional attempts at planting large churches in Texas and Pennsylvania, we do not start new churches. I attend General Assembly each year where we celebrate less than a dozen new congregations, each of which claim a couple dozen members. We are not told how many similarly sized congregations closed their doors in the past year.

The question that needs to be asked is not, "Why do we not possess a compelling theology?" It is not, "Why don't we welcome visitors?" It is not, "Why don't we give more than we do?" The question is, "Why don't we start more churches?"

I am biased to believe that a ministerial presence is required for a church of size to thrive. I am biased to believe that a church will be hard-pressed to grow without a minister. I am also biased to believe that if a church is started that is to grow to hundreds or thousands of members, a minister needs to be closely involved in starting it. Let me amend the previous question. The question really is, **"So, why don't UU ministers start churches?"**

This question could perhaps be phrased even differently. What dynamics exist that prevent UU ministers from starting their own churches? There are a number of possible answers for this: Perhaps church planting is something that ministers do not learn in seminary. Some have suggested that the "feminization" of the clergy of which Ann Douglas speaks has sapped our ministry of its entrepreneurial zeal. Perhaps the trend in seminary towards students in mid-life and beyond has made our movement less welcome to enthusiastic entrepreneurial ministers. Perhaps our clergy lacks a desire to grow. I'm not sure any of these possibilities are the answer. Rather, I believe it is something else.

I believe that it is our insistence on a learned, professional clergy that discourages ministers who would begin their own churches. Let me explain.

To become a UU minister, the first thing you need to do is get a bachelor's degree. Then you need to get accepted to a Master of Divinity program, which takes at least three years to complete. On top of that, you add in an internship, fieldwork, and a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education. A small handful of uniquely driven individuals complete the process in three years. Most take four or five and many take more. The process to become "minimally qualified" to serve as a minister is long, intense, and extremely expensive. The result of such a process is that those who leap the hurdles and jump through the hoops finish their seminary education with a sense of **entitlement**. Namely, they feel entitled to a position of gainful employment in a congregation.

Evidence of Entitlement

This sense of entitlement is manifest in seminary students who wonder if there will be enough churches in search when they enter search and who ask, "How does this year's crop of congregations look?" It is manifest in a discussion I overheard between interim ministers lamenting that "not enough congregations are looking for interims," seemingly without a hint of awareness of the ramifications of such a statement. The sense of entitlement is manifest in colleagues who complain about too many new ministers entering the movement! It's present in discussions about whether the Ministerial Fellowship Committee should have a stricter hand, or a quota system. It seems to be taken for granted that each minister who completes the gauntlet of professional preparation is entitled to a church, and if they don't get one, then it is the system's fault.

A sense of entitlement can also be ascertained by listening to UU ministers complain about where the UUA spends money. Those working with small congregations say, "Fund us!" Large congregation ministers say, "Focus on us!" Community ministers say, "Assist community ministry." Mid-size congregation ministers say, "Develop programs for us!" There is a universal cry saying, "Give to me."

I don't claim not to have experienced this sense of entitlement myself. I was granted Fellowship by the MFC soon after my 25th birthday and just as I was beginning my final year in seminary. My course of preparation included a BA in religion from an elite liberal arts college, a masters degree from Harvard, a full year internship at a UU church, a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education, and three additional student ministries and field education placements. I finished seminary carrying a debt load of \$36,000 from my two degrees combined (significantly less than many carry.) The sense of entitlement I experienced was felt on many levels. One level was financial entitlement. I needed to earn enough to live off of and pay down my debt, but I also felt that I deserved to be compensated as a professional. Similarly, there was a sense of professional entitlement. I expected an office, a computer, an expense account, professional development funds, a pension, and an insurance package beyond the salary I earned. I expected to be seen as a professional. I also felt a sense of collegial entitlement, a life comparable to other colleagues. In short, the rigorous course of professional preparation to become a Unitarian Universalist minister diminished my entrepreneurial zeal and made me reliant on institutional systems that would (I hope) provide for my livelihood.

I've often imagined a conversation between an 18 year old Bill Gates and his faculty advisor at Harvard in which his advisor says to him: "You clearly have some gifts for computing. After you

get your Bachelors, you should go on for a Masters. Then, you could probably get a nice position with IBM and really do well for yourself.”

I do not see how it is possible for anyone to pursue fellowship as a Unitarian Universalist parish minister and not complete that process feeling a sense of entitlement to a parish position that is as risk-free as possible. And once a parish position is attained, I do not see how it is possible for a minister’s entrepreneurial zeal not to be further diminished by the pressures of maintaining employment by not rocking the boat too hard. Church growth is good, of course, because with that growth comes the opportunity for greater compensation as well as greater esteem by colleagues and greater marketability for oneself as a minister. However, growth that happens too quickly is perceived as threatening. The congregation tells the minister, “Don’t try to change us too much if you want to keep your job.”

I conclude that I see no way for our Association to continue to **both** insist that all ministers go through the rigorous process of professional formation that produces a “learned clergy” **and** pursue growth through minister-led church planting, which is the best way to grow Unitarian Universalism. The two church-plants in Texas and Pennsylvania confirm for me this conclusion. They look for an entrepreneur but offer a comfortable establishment package. Even if they were successful, which doesn’t seem like it will be the case, there would be no conceivable way to fund more than a dozen of these plantings in a ten year period and it would takes dozens of plantings each and every year to grow our movement.

Currently, our UUA staff and others interested in growth look at the growing evangelical churches for inspiration. We say, “the evangelical churches are growing.” This statement is in fact not true. The true statement is that **some** evangelical churches are growing. For each Saddleback there are dozens and perhaps hundreds of living room and storefront churches that never take hold, perhaps like many of our small fellowships. For each Rick Warren, there are hundreds if not thousands of would-be pastors who fail to gather a flock that can afford to support their ministry. What is different is that in that movement the price of failing is much less.

The downside of our professional development is that we invest, and expect our would-be ministers to invest, so much in their professional development that it would be immoral for us to encourage a system where less than ten percent, perhaps less than one percent, succeed in gathering a church.

A Modest Proposal

It would be unfair of me to conclude without offering a proposal. Here is my proposal for denominational growth. Each and every congregation of three-hundred members or greater that is located in either an urban environment, or that has a significant part of its membership living five miles or more from the church, or that is geographically close to a growing exurban demographic should do the following.

- 1) Congregations of three-hundred or more where a significant membership base lives five miles or more from the church, or that are geographically close to a growing exurban demographic should create an associate ministry position for an individual with leadership potential and an entrepreneurial spirit and license this person to preach. The term of employment should be for between one and two years. Larger congregations (450 members or more) might hire more than one such associate. As a staff member, the associate is to apprentice under the senior minister and other

staff, gain training at a local seminary and from the UUA at the district level (district conferences and leadership school), continental level (General Assembly and mid-size or large church conferences), and from resources outside the UUA. The associate's most important role in his or her position is to form a bond with church members who live in a particular geographical area. At the end of the associate's term, the associate is to leave with a flock of 50-100 congregants and establish a new congregation closer to where this group lives.

2) Congregations of three hundred or more that are urban in location **and** serve a predominantly urban population should rent space in a warehouse, loft, or dying church and hire at least one associate. The associate would apprentice and train and also become familiar with "Emergent Christianity." The associate would develop a key group of young adults at the host congregation and then relocate with this young adult leadership team (6-12 members) and plant an emergent young adult UU congregation that continues to be subsidized by the host congregation until it is self-sufficient.

3) Congregations that draw significant membership from both urban and suburban/exurban populations should decide to a) move the existing flock to the suburbs leaving the current building behind to an emergent congregation, or b) send their suburban members away with an associate to start a new congregation.

Assumptions

I assume that this model would succeed in growing Unitarian Universalism significantly. Currently there are 105 UU congregations in the United States with membership over 300 and not located in New England. (New England seems like somewhat of a saturated market.) Suppose 50 of those congregations attempted this, and half of those succeeded (success measured by establishing an independent congregation that doubled in size inside of two years.) For those that failed, the members that split away could easily re-integrate with the congregation which sent them. The congregation that sent forth its members would have an incentive to learn welcoming skills and financial generosity in order to offset their loss, and would quickly re-grow those members. It is my assumption that Unitarian Universalism could add as many as fifty new congregations every two years, with each of those congregations able to sustain a paid minister. If each of those new congregations that succeeded stopped growing at 150 members and the church that sent them forth added new members to offset the loss, the result would be 7,500 new UUs every two years. If those split-off congregations grew to an average of 300 members, that would be 15,000 new UUs.

I also assume that this practice of licensing ministers is compatible with our history. The Universalists practiced it. And I assume that licensed associates would have an incentive towards continuing education as they grew their congregations. Finally, I assume that the sense of entitlement that comes from the current process for ministerial formation would be replaced with an entrepreneurial spirit, especially as there are incentives for growth.

To Summarize:

There are many theories about why Unitarian Universalism is not growing. Many of those theories contain seeds of truth, however, an association cannot grow if it does not start new churches. We do not grow because we do not start new churches. The current process of minister-credentialing turns out ministers who are institutionalists rather than risk-takers. Ministers have a sense of

entitlement (“I am entitled to serve a congregation that pays me enough to live”) and live out patterns in their ministry that protect what they feel entitled to. Bold initiatives that may alienate even ten-percent of the congregation are avoided; if ten-percent refuse to pledge, the minister is probably looking at a pay-cut at best. A growth strategy in which congregations trained ministers from within and birthed congregations already able to sustain ministry, would grow Unitarian Universalism tremendously. This scenario involves little-risk but much up-side.