

### **Presentation: Unitarian Universalism: Where are we Headed?**

Good morning. It is helpful for you to know something about me as I talk about where I believe we are headed as Unitarian Universalists in the next fifty years. I have been a member of this congregation for nearly 33 years and a UU for about 38 years. Perhaps, like some of you, we discovered a UU church when our kids were young and we were searching for a church that reflected our values and beliefs. We were not sure one existed until we found a UU church in State College, PA. It changed our lives and continues to do so.

For the past seven years I have served as the trustee from the Pacific Southwest District to the UUA Board and for the past four years I have served as Secretary of the UUA. Part of my responsibility in that role has been to certify congregations for membership, which includes tracking their membership size, attendance, budgets and other demographic information. As a member of the Board I have shared responsibility for monitoring the progress our Association staff is making in meeting goals, or Ends as we refer to them. It has given me an opportunity to both sit in the front row and occasionally be on the stage of a shifting change in our faith.

There is much to know about where we are and where we are headed and, of course, the source of most of it comes from the UUA where there is somewhat of an inherent bias. I wanted to look at this from an outsider's perspective first to get a more critical viewpoint. I started with an article from The Christian Century titled "Can creedless Unitarians make it another 50 years?" Here is some of what the author discusses:

A recent Sunday service at the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore ended with an apology. ... a neo-pagan lay member who led the service, feared that a reference to God in "Once to Every Soul and Nation" might upset the humanists in the pews.

...

Such remarks are typical in the anything-but-typical Unitarian Universalist Association, a liberal religious movement with a proud history of welcoming all seekers of truth—as long as it's spelled with a lowercase t. For 50 years the Boston-based UUA has conducted a virtually unprecedented experiment: advancing a religion without doctrine, hoping that welcoming communities and shared political causes, not creeds, will draw people to their pews.

Leaders say its no-religious-questions-asked style positions the UUA to capitalize on liberalizing trends in American religion. But as the UUA turns 50 this year, some members argue that a midlife identity crisis is hampering outreach and hindering growth. In trying to be all things to everyone, they say, the association risks becoming nothing to anybody.

The UUA does promote seven largely secular principles that emphasize human dignity and justice. Membership in the UUA dipped in 2011 for the third consecutive year to 162,800, a loss of about 1,400 members. The number of congregations fell by two to 1,046.

... Nearly 4,000 Unitarian Universalists gathered in Charlotte, North Carolina, June 22–26 for the association's annual assembly, where they celebrated their golden anniversary with hymns, remembrances and a large cake.

As usual, progressive politics prevailed, with pledges for an "institutional commitment" to ethical eating, an antidiscrimination rally and a special collection taken for ministry to immigrants. Such activism dates to 19th-century Unitarian godfather William Ellery Channing, who argued that the aim of religious life is to encourage public virtue.

...

"There has certainly been an increase in the amount of people who are open to the kind of ideas the Unitarian Universalists have championed," said John C. Green, a political scientist who worked on the Pew studies and has studied the UUA. "Whether they can convert that into members joining them is an open question. But the opportunity is certainly there."

Peter Morales, the UUA's current president, calls those trends, as well as the exodus of Americans from most Christian denominations, "an amazing opportunity." "Millions of people are actively seeking a progressive, non-dogmatic spiritual community," he said. "Our challenge is to be the religious community that embraces those people."

But some say the UUA is held back by members' reluctance to proclaim religious tenets—a tricky task for an association that includes Christians, Buddhists, Jews, pagans, humanists and spiritual refugees from a host of more dogmatic faiths. Many UUA members say they find meaning and purpose in the familial bonds forged in congregations—regardless of religious beliefs.

David Bumbaugh, a professor of ministry at the UUA's Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago, was present at the founding of the

association in 1961. He says the UUA has always shied away from God-talk for fear of offending members and shattering congregations.

But Bumbaugh has made the rounds recently at regional UUA conferences, encouraging them to publicly wrestle with foundational questions. "What do we believe? Whom do we serve? To whom or what are we responsible? Those are the questions with which every viable religious movement must wrestle," Bumbaugh has said. "So long as those essential questions remain unaddressed, the dream will remain unfulfilled."

An internal UUA report from 2005 suggested that more than dreams could die. The whole association could collapse if members continue to muffle religious discussion, the report said. "The consensus of experts from an array of fields—from organizational development to systematic theology—is that to grow effectively, a religious organization needs clearly defined boundaries," the report states. "And one cannot put even the most permeable boundary around nothing."

Clearly, there is an increasing trend in Unitarian Universalism for religious discussion in ways that we have not seen in the last 50 years. I believe it is being driven by trends in society at large that have an inevitable impact on our congregations.

In the President's Report at our recent general Assembly in Louisville, KY, Rev Peter Morales discussed some demographic trends in religions generally and UUs specifically. Most mainline denominations have watched membership and attendance shrink dramatically over the last several decades. Reductions of as much as a third of membership have affected

Methodists, Presbyterians and others. Even Catholics have only maintained a steady membership and that largely due to immigration. At the same time UUs have had some small growth. Morales comments:

“Here we are together . . . in a time of unprecedented change in our culture and in the landscape around us. This is an historic opportunity for Unitarian Universalism. Nobody aligns with the values of the emerging generation the way we do. Absolutely nobody. People are hungry for a religion that I call multi: Multicultural, multiracial, multigenerational, multifaith, multinational. We’re in the midst of a transformation, but we have to move quickly.”

The American Religious Identification Survey, or ARIS, has been conducted three times between 1990 and 2008. It found that persons who identify as Unitarian Universalist increased from 463,000 in 1990 to 586,000 in 2008 or a 26% increase. Interestingly, this does not reflect actual membership numbers in congregations. The most recent Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life indicates about .3% of the US population identifies as UU. This works out conservatively to approximately 800,000 UUs in the country. If they all came to church today every UU church in the country would have three times as many people as are actually there and that’s if every member showed up.

So, what are the opportunities that these demographics lead us to? Most marketers will tell you that to succeed with your brand you either need to convert the user from another brand or you need to attract those with no brand preference. Increasingly we see people either abandoning the church the family has always belonged to in favor of no church or an increasing

number who have never had a religious affiliation. This group of people checks that box on religious preference that says “None”. The nones, not to be confused with my employer, the Sisters of St Joseph, are the fastest growing demographic in the religious landscape. In 1980, when I joined OCUUC, they represented just 5% of the population. Today, they represent over 20% and among young adults it is over one-third of that group. Since 2000 the percentage of Nones in the country has almost doubled and the trend is continuing. This is the opportunity President Morales points to and other independent researchers as well.

So how do the demographics and preferences of the nones align with UUs?  
Some statistics:

What is the importance of Religion in one’s Life? UUs: 61% somewhat to very important; Nones: 100%

Party Affiliation: Independent, Democratic or lean Democratic: UUs 81%; Nones 70%

Political ideology: Moderate to Liberal: UUs 80%; Nones 73%

Views on homosexuality: Should be accepted in society: UUs 84% and Nones 71%

Environmental protection: Stricter laws are worth the cost: UUs 77% Nones 69%

US Role in World Affairs: Best for our future to be involved in World affairs: UUs 41% and Nones 34%

Should pay less attention to problems overseas: UUs 46% Nones 58%

Other factors: The highest percentage of Nones lives in the west and in the south

60% of Nones are between age 30 and 64. Only 8% are over 65.

59% are males and 41% are female. Just the opposite of UU members

73% are white and 11% are Hispanic

68% have incomes of less than \$75,000 per year, which is about the same as UUs

53% have some college up through post grad degree compared to 81% of UUs

What does not show up in this limited statistical profile is that in almost every case the Nones most closely align with UUs over any other group.

So what is the UUA and congregations doing in the face of this incredible shift in the religious landscape?

The quick answer is --- not enough...yet, but we are taking steps. The UUA does not and cannot tell a UU congregation what it must do. It can recommend and it can make certain services conditional but in the end every congregation decides for itself. However the UUA does provide services to assist congregations along most dimensions of congregation life. We just used the services of the UUA to assist us in finding a new minister for our congregation. They did the work of certifying her competence as a UU minister. They have the ability to remove that certification if necessary. The UUA writes curriculum for religious education; they publish our hymnal; they publish other books on a variety of topics that can be useful for

congregations through Skinner House; the Beacon Press is an award winning publishing house that expands our progressive message on many topics to the general public; they provide a well managed investment fund to securely place congregations' assets in a highly respected and socially conscious investment portfolio; they will use small investments in large corporations to file shareholder petitions to bring corporation practices into alignment with our values; they create marketing materials to be used for various types of media; they organize our General Assembly to bring thousands of us together at one time for worship, social justice, education, governance and more; they pay a significant share of the cost of staff in our district; they organize web based services in the forms of email lists on important topics, current events and on-going education; they publish paper editions and online editions of The UU World magazine with coverage of national, international and regional events and topics of interest to UUs; they provide guidance on fair employment practices for all levels of congregation employees; they provide training and guidance in anti-racism/anti-oppression and multi-cultural work that is often referred to by other denominations as the standard for this kind of progressive work. I could keep going but you get the idea and everywhere I said: "they do something" I really mean "we" do something. The UUA is just an Association of Congregations.

And that leads me to another trend; since merger in 1961 we have defined "congregation" along the lines of brick and mortar institutions. Today's demographics though may not fit that definition any longer. What about meetings of youth or young adults that may never take place in a physical location or they take place at one of our camps or a college campus several



times a year? We took steps this year to change our by-laws to reflect that UUs may come together in what may seem to be non-traditional ways but are as meaningful to them as any traditional congregation is to its members. The Pew research tells us there are as many as 800,000 people out there who will identify as UUs if asked. Maybe a new definition of congregation is more likely to bring them to us in a more identified way. We have to make the space available. And we are.

The UUA is facilitating but not requiring congregations to think about ourselves in a larger context. There have been as many as 22 districts around the country. This year several of those districts have dissolved themselves to form a region. Others are thinking about it. In April of this year the four western districts met together for the first time for a single annual meeting. Over 600 members of congregations were there from Fairbanks to Honolulu to Albuquerque to Boise. Our districts are not going anywhere but we saw the value in being able to be together and learn from one another. The staffs we employ in each district will now be able to assist and even lead in other districts based on need. Members of our congregations in the Pacific Southwest will be able to participate in the largest leadership school in the country sponsored by the Mountain Desert District. Very importantly our youth and young adults will have more opportunities for engagement in a regional setting.

The work of the PSWD and Pacific Central congregations in supporting the California Legislative Ministry has provided a model to other states for creating similar organizations to advocate for our values in tangible ways. As just one example, the CA UU Legislative Ministry lobbied CA legislators over several years on an important issue in CA: water, and who has a right to

water. This year for the first time anywhere our state passed a human right to safe water bill. It is the law! Can you imagine it was not before this? Its passage was due in large part to the UU Legislative Ministry.

In other legislation UUs filed amicus briefs in the Supreme Court hearing and decision on upholding the circuit court ruling that Prop 8 violates the constitution. The UU brief was referenced in the briefs of others and in the opinions of several of the justices. We can be extremely proud of this work.

In every time and in every generation since Unitarians and Universalists were part of the religious landscape we have had an impact and been aligned and often leading the major issues of the day: federalism at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, voting equality, prison reform, Civil Rights, peace making, gender equality, ethical eating, child welfare, foreign relations, Civil Disobedience, immigration reform and much, much more. As Unitarian Universalists we have never just stood by in the face of tyranny, inequity and irrational public conscience. Our actions are uniquely American as we continue to move ourselves, our congregations and our communities to be the epitome of what a progressive religious group brings to the betterment of society. When we do this we can't be ignored and won't be ignored. Our pulpit has always been a place for this tradition and it will continue to be even when we take that pulpit to the courthouse steps to spread our message of universal love, righteous anger and indignation and a message of hope for a better tomorrow for everyone. We will be noticed and others will join us in ways we can yet only imagine.

May it be so. Amen

## Call to Worship

The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice.

It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed. – Mark Morrison-Reed

## Meditation

### “Meditation for a Beautiful Day”

Ah, how beautiful is this day. How crisp and clean the air. How clear the sky. How full of life the teeming earth. And we are alive! Yes, we feel the beat of our own hearts, the pulsing of life in our veins, the rhythm of our breathing. We come into the silence of this time with gratitude for this day.

We come also with our needs. Our gratitude stirs us to praise and sing our thanksgiving. Our loneliness draws us into the company of others. Our restlessness draws us into these moments of quiet. Our longing for the spirit brings us before the mystery of the holy. Our desire to heal our own wounds and the wounds of our world brings us here to renew our strength and hope.

And we come into this space because we have gifts to share: words of healing and encouragement for those who are burdened; songs of praise and hope; smiles of comfort and affection; deeds of love and kindness.

Each of us comes to dip into the well that nourishes our hungry spirits. Each of us comes with our own cup of goodness to pour into the well. We drink together. May we be strengthened in our bonds of love and peace.

## Closing

"We seek to be a community that serves, that speaks, that celebrates and prays in such a way that others — regardless of their religious belief — encountering this community experience a revelation of life's deepest truths . . . about human dignity, community, success, power, growth, sacrifice, love, suffering, debility, and death. Experiencing a harmony between their heart's deepest resonances and this community's character, persons go from this encounter more healed, more whole, more able to live, to love, to hope, to die."