

## “Time to Grow?”

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It's always a wonderful experience  
to welcome new members into this church,  
and today is no exception.  
There is something almost magical about this occasion  
when someone chooses to formally become part of this community.  
It's almost like a wedding—  
through that combination of intent and words spoken, promises  
made,  
our relationship is forever changed.  
Now we are one people, committed to walk together.

We are one community,  
a congregation of seekers, of exploration,  
committed to witnessing and serving the world beyond us,  
committed to welcoming all people.  
This is powerful.  
I personally am so grateful for the presence of this church  
and what it stands for.  
At our best, we are a refuge and a witness for the liberal spirit  
in a community that sorely needs our vision.

Today especially, it seems right to ask,  
how are we doing on making room  
for everyone who walks through our doors,  
everyone who might be strengthened and transformed  
by the power of our faith?

That's a big and always ongoing question,  
but I want to look at a very specific part of it today—

literally, is there enough room here, physically, right here,  
for us to welcome all the people we want to welcome?  
And, if not, what might we do about that?

Let me say a special word to the visitors who are here today.  
Every now and then I preach on something  
that relates really specifically to this congregation,  
a choice we're facing or something we need to figure out.  
This is one of those times,  
and I hope you will find it a worthwhile glimpse into who we are.  
I'm glad you're here.

That said, let me tell you what's on my mind.  
For some time now I've been wondering  
about when we'd get to the point  
when we needed to look at adding a second worship service.  
This church has considered that  
at least once or twice in the last few years,  
before my time but in the memory of a lot of folks here today.  
And now and then I've wondered  
if and when that idea might come up again.  
In the last few months, to me at least,  
it's been looking pretty crowded in here on Sunday mornings,  
which is great!  
Maybe some weeks it's even felt almost *too* crowded.  
From my perch up here I've seen families come in  
and practically need to go exploring  
to find enough seats in a row to sit together.  
Not every week, but often enough to make me notice.  
So, a few weeks ago, I decided to spend some of my study time  
reading some of the very practical literature which is available  
about how to tell when it's time to add a second service.

First I took a look at a manual  
published by our Unitarian Universalist Association.

This was the source of our reading earlier.  
And here I read something that really struck me.  
They say:

Studies of congregational life show that when worship attendance reaches 75 to 80 percent of seating capacity, a congregation often experiences [a] plateau [in membership]. Newcomers wonder if space even exists for them; when they do stay, others may leave.... [L]ongtime members may feel they aren't needed and thus stay home.<sup>1</sup>

As I say, this really struck me.  
I'd heard many times that if a service is too full,  
visitors won't tend to come back.  
That's bad enough,  
but the part I had never heard before and really got to me  
was the part about longtime members feeling displaced  
and starting to stay home just because there's not enough room  
for everyone, new *and* old.

So, OK, at this point in my research  
I began to feel quite a sense of urgency to figure out where we were  
at  
in our worship attendance,  
whether we had crossed that 80% threshold.  
I counted up the seats in the sanctuary, twice to make double-sure,  
and if you do the same, you will find that we have 110 chairs  
plus four seats on the benches in the back. That makes 114.  
So I went back to that formula—  
if you have more than 80% of your seats filled, you're too crowded.  
Now, 80% of 114 seats is 91.  
And I knew we weren't up to an average attendance of 91 people,  
so I breathed a little easier...

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<sup>1</sup> Unitarian Universalist Association, *Adding Worship Services: A How-To Manual* (2004), p. 2. Available online at <http://www.uua.org/documents/congservices/addingworshipservices.pdf>.

...but only until I got to another fact that *really* surprised me. This one came from Alice Mann, who is probably the foremost expert in the entire country on what happens as churches change in size. Here's what she says in one of her recent books:

Worship space is effectively 'filled up' when 80 percent of the desirable seats [measured at 30 to 36 inches per person] are full on any regular basis.<sup>2</sup>

Now, at first glance, that sounded like what I had just read in the UUA manual. There was that same advice, that we'd be full when we got to 80%. But then I noticed she was talking about *desirable* seats. I know if I was visiting a church for the first time, I wouldn't want to be sitting in the middle of the front row. (I'd wait for my second visit to do that!) So already I was tweaking our visitor-friendly seating capacity a bit downward in my mind.

And then there was this little snippet about defining one seat as 30 to 36 inches. *That* was new to me, and surprising, but personally I do trust Alice Mann. She's very good and knows what she's talking about based on many years of consulting experience. So I got out my trusty ruler and measured our sanctuary chairs. And lo and behold, in case you've never thought about it, as I had not, they are actually 20 inches wide. So then I went to my calculator and asked, if we assume people really need 30 inches of space per person

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<sup>2</sup> Alice Mann, *Raising the Roof: The Pastoral-to-Program Size Transition* (Alban Institute, 2001), p. 20.

to feel like there's enough room for them to feel comfortable, what's our seating capacity then? I won't go into all the details right now, but it worked out to an *adjusted* seating capacity of about 86 people.

Then I thought, OK, let's play with that a little. I went back to that guideline that says if the sanctuary is at 80% of capacity, it is so full that visitors won't stay or longtime members will stop coming, or both. Now, 80% of 86 comfortable seats is 69— or say 70, just to make it easy to remember. So what that means is that, according to Alice Mann, who, again, is one of *the* experts in the field, when our average attendance on Sunday gets up to 70, we are physically crowded enough that our congregation will probably not be able to grow. Either visitors will not return or longtime members will drift away, or both.

The next question is, what *is* our average attendance? This we actually know, thanks to our ushers who count this for us every week. From 2002 to 2004, our average attendance stayed steady right around 62 people each Sunday. In 2005, however, it went up to 72 people per Sunday. And for the last two years, we've been averaging 75 people per Sunday. What all this means is, we have been *beyond* that 80% capacity point since 2005. If Alice Mann's model is correct, we are already too crowded for growth to be possible. The only way to free up space for new people to join us, and even to make room for everyone who is already here,

would be to take that leap of adding a second worship service.

This really surprised me.

But when I discovered it, I knew I had to share this with you.

I think it's certainly worthy of our consideration.

Now, all these statistics don't tell us what we *should* do.

They only help us predict

what the results of our choices are likely to be.

The research I've just outlined for you does say

that if we stay with our current model of one Sunday service,

which many of us love for many good reasons,

our congregation will probably stay the same size overall.

That may be what we want, or it may not—but it's *information*.

On the other hand, if we did decide to try adding a service,

which obviously comes with many questions,

many challenges to figure out,

our congregation would be likely to grow in numbers.

Alice Mann reports that eight out of ten North American churches that begin a new service will experience numerical growth.<sup>3</sup>

Again, that may be what we want, or it may not—

but it's *information*.

I've given you this information now,

and once you know something, it's hard to un-know it.

I hope you'll take it seriously.

But it's up to you to figure out what to do *about* it.

In the Unitarian Universalist tradition,

we have great respect for the collective wisdom of the congregation.

This is how we make all our most important decisions—

through discussion—often *lots* of discussion—

and patience and discernment,

and ultimately deciding as an entire congregation.

No one person can force the group to go one way or the other.

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<sup>3</sup> Alice Mann, *Raising the Roof*, p. 163.

Leadership works by persuasion, not compulsion.  
It is your choice and nobody else's.

Let me turn now to a few thoughts  
on why this church might want to choose one way or the other.  
It might be that the congregation chooses not to grow.  
A lot of us think we're a nice size for getting to know people.  
It's comfortable and comforting to walk in on a Sunday  
and recognize most if not all of the faces.

And when you stay the same size for a while,  
you build up a certain expertise; you know how to do things.  
Those of us who have been around for a few years  
have a pretty good sense of what's possible and what's not  
with a group this size  
in terms of our programming and our outreach to the community.  
It's easier to plan if you know how many you're planning for  
into the future.

I should mention, by the way, that your church staff  
and your board of trustees are well aware  
adding a service would come with a lot of challenges to figure out.  
We've been playing with the idea a little bit,  
asking "what if...? What would it be like?"  
and we do have some tentative ideas  
to address the big logistical questions like,  
what about the choir? What about religious education?  
Nothing is set in stone, obviously,  
but at this moment nothing looks impossible either.

Maybe the biggest reason to stick with one service  
would be not wanting to give up that feeling  
of being one community, all together, on Sunday mornings.  
Adding a second service would, in some ways, feel like a loss.  
It would be harder to get the whole community together.

You couldn't be sure of seeing everyone you know on Sunday.  
You can make plans with friends  
to come to a particular service, but it's not quite the same.  
This would be a change that might feel a little sad,  
a little bittersweet.

And yet the reasons we might *want* to grow are just as compelling.  
If you appreciate the sense of community you've found here,  
that sense that this is a safe place to come and be yourself,  
a place that gives you energy to go out and serve the world—  
if this is the kind of community you experience here,  
you probably want it to be open to other people too.  
I'm guessing you probably want there to be room here  
for your friends, or members of your family,  
and indeed for people you haven't even met yet.

If our way of being religious  
has made a positive difference in your life,  
you probably want other people to have that too.  
If you are proud of our social witness in the larger community,  
if you are proud of being part of a church  
where *all* people are welcome, no matter who they are,  
you might decide that making room for more people  
really would be worth the cost.

There is so much more to think about, to say,  
but the next words really deserve to be yours.  
I would love to hear everyone's thoughts.  
I'd love to hear what *you* think we should do.  
So please tell me!  
If there's enough interest,  
we will convene a listening session in the next month or so,  
so that everyone has a chance to weigh in and share your thoughts.  
And we will figure it out together.

That's the gift of this wonderful tradition we share.  
I am so glad to be on this journey with you.  
I don't know exactly where we're going,  
but I believe it's going to be marvelous.  
May we trust in ourselves,  
may we trust in our wisdom,  
in all of our gifts  
and all the blessings still to unfold.

So may it be.  
Amen.