

Big Ideas
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“A fisherman once sat in the midday sun, gazing out to sea, watching his little fishing boat riding at anchor, and thinking to himself how good it was to sit in the sun with no worries, watch the waves breaking, and enjoy [the day].

But his daydream was interrupted when a smartly dressed . . . businessman came up to him, and broke into his reverie with a sharp question: ‘What are you doing lazing around at midday? Why aren’t you out fishing?’ Somewhat taken aback, the fisherman replied, ‘I’ve done my day’s fishing. I’ve taken my fish to market, and now I’m relaxing in the sun.’

‘But why don’t you put out to sea again and catch some more fish?’ his questioner insisted. ‘Why would I want to do that?’ replied the fisherman politely. ‘Well, then you would make twice as much money.’ ‘Why would I want to do that?’ ‘Well, then you buy a bigger, better boat, and catch more fish. You could even employ other people to do the fishing. My word, you could own a whole fleet of fishing boats if you weren’t so lazy.’

‘Why would I want to do that?’ ‘Well, if you owned your own fleet of boats, and employed other people to do the fishing, you would have as much money as you could ever dream of.’ ‘Why would I want that?’ ‘Well, then you could spend the rest of your life just doing whatever you wanted to do, sitting in the sun, relaxing and enjoying yourself, with no worries . . .’¹

There is a danger whenever a religious leader promotes congregational growth, whether the religious leader is a lay person or a member of the clergy. The danger is that the religious leader can sound like the businessman in the story, promoting a bigger fishing fleet so that after much aggravation, congregation members come to enjoy a quality of life more or less like the one that they already enjoy. Why bother? That is a provocative and valid question.

¹ “The Fisherman’s Dream” (source unknown), *One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World*, compiled by Margaret Silf, The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, Ohio, 2003, p. 78.

Two primary challenges face any congregation that wonders whether it wants to grow. First, if the congregation has no clear sense of mission, of trying to make the world outside its sanctuary a better place, then it will not grow, no matter what. The second challenge for any religious congregation that wonders whether it wants to grow is how to welcome newcomers without somehow, even subconsciously, placing newcomers into a competition with longer term members for the benefits of congregational life.

Rationally, of course, we know that the benefits of congregational life are not a zero sum game. However, we are emotional creatures at least as often as we are rational creatures. Especially for the kind of cultural “outsiders” that Unitarian Universalism tends to attract, once we find acceptance and make friends inside the congregation, it can be hard to let go of being an “insider” so that there is room for newer members. This is especially true in the settings where decisions are made. At yesterday’s “prospective member session,” I distributed a copy of the congregation’s most recent monthly financial statement. I said, “It is never too soon to start to learn about money and power.”

Self-identified Unitarian Universalists constitute one half percent to one percent of the population of the United States. That is a small number. And yet, the number of certified members of Unitarian Universalist congregations is even smaller. In other words, more people in this country self-identify as Unitarian Universalist than are members of congregations. All the contradictions and tensions around growth are confusing. That is why I love the book by Jane Dwinell and Ellen Germann-Melosh, *Big Ideas for Small Congregations*.

That title is significant. They could have called it *Helping Small Congregations to Become Larger Congregations*, but they did not. I suspect that the title *Big Ideas for Small Congregations* was chosen instead of alternative titles for the same reason that the fisherman in the story was not inclined to buy a fleet of fishing boats and to employ others to fish just so that he could enjoy the lifestyle that he already enjoyed.

Jane Dwinell and Ellen Germann-Melosh love small congregations. Their point is this: “Whatever size you are, know that there are gifts and challenges all along the way. The trick is

to be the best you can be at whatever size you are. Have quality worship, find one social action project to commit to, pay your bills, take care of each other, learn to handle conflict graciously, welcome visitors, and love your children. Any congregation can do that.”²

There are three areas of congregational life, they say: centering, connecting, and creating change. “Centering” is grounding in basic structures and support – governance, money, property, staff, communications, conflict management, and the all-essential paperwork. “Connecting” is being in relationship with something larger than ourselves through worship, religious exploration, caring, hospitality, and reaching out to other faith communities. “Creating change” is creating heaven on earth within our congregations and the larger world.³

There are four points from their book that I would like to lift up. First, the mission of the congregation is that place where the congregation’s gifts meet the community’s needs.⁴ In the coming year, let us strive to gain a sense of our mission. Second, regarding conflict and change, they note, “Many of our older humanist members are challenged by the increasing spirituality and ‘god talk’ in many of our congregations. Maintaining a theological balance and an open mind is a struggle for many of our congregations – of every size . . . Newcomers need to understand and appreciate the love old timers have for their church, and the old timers need to understand and appreciate the love newcomers have for what they have found. It is a deep religious quest to walk together in peace with this kind of difference.”⁵

Third, regarding the number of empty seats in the sanctuary on Sunday morning, “The standard rule of thumb is that if your sanctuary is more than eighty percent full, a visitor (and some members) will not feel comfortable. However, that eighty percent figure is only valid for people who live in cities and are more used to crowded conditions. For people in suburbs and small towns, a sanctuary sixty percent full feels crowded. If you’re in a rural area, forty percent feels like too much.”⁶ If you arrive early one Sunday and find me dragging more folding chairs out of

² Big Ideas for Small Congregations: A Friendly Guide for Leaders, Jane Dwinell and Ellen Germann-Melosh, Spirit of Life Publishing, Montpelier, Vermont, 2007, p. 21.

³ Page 26.

⁴ Page 27.

⁵ Page 89.

⁶ Page 113.

the shed into the sanctuary, that is why. I hope you will join me in setting up more chairs.

The fourth and final point I lift up is the wisdom of trying to grow no more than 10% each year.⁷ “You don’t want to grow too fast, as that can be disruptive and even more challenging for your church community,” they write. However, given that, on average, congregations lose 10% of their members each year to moving away, drifting away, or death, a congregation that wants to grow by 10% each year needs to increase its membership by 20% to cover the losses of moving away, drifting away, or death. As of this morning, I understand that our membership stands at 138. We will need another 13.8 members within the next year to stay even, and we will need 13.8 members on top of that to grow by 10%. My question for you is this: Can you welcome another 27.6 people here in the coming year? ;) If you can, talk about your vision. If you cannot, talk about your reservations.

At the end of the day, what is life about? Life is about quality, not quantity. What matters is the amount of *life* in our days, not the number of days in our lives. None of us knows what the future holds. In this time of worldwide economic turmoil and anxiety, we must keep in mind our responsibility to shape the future. As Unitarian Universalists, our obligation is not so much about remembering the past or honoring the present as it is about shaping the future.

How wonderful it is to welcome new members into the congregation this morning! As it happens, the top priority of the congregation’s Board of Trustees is membership growth, development, and retention. Thank you to everyone who contributes to membership growth, development, and retention. I especially thank members who reach out and say hello to a newcomer before the service starts, after it ends, or both. This small act of kindness – prioritizing the newcomer – is the essence of hospitality.

The ability to put ourselves into the shoes of a newcomer, to want to get to know a newcomer, to want to help ease his or her way – those qualities are important to nurture. For some of us, it comes “naturally.” For others, it takes determination and practice to change habits. Speaking personally, on Sunday morning, my focus is on newcomers. Long term members who approach

⁷ Page 159.

me to talk about congregational business may (despite my best effort at a poker face) sense a degree of impatience in me as they speak. Yes, I am probably thinking, “The rest of the week is available for taking care of congregational business. Sunday morning is for company.”

I have lost track of the name of the person who said that, but at a fundamental level, I agree. “Sunday morning is for company.” Those are stark words, even alienating words. In some congregations, those would be fighting words. That Sunday morning philosophy can only work in a congregation which has valuable and valued ways for members to connect in between Sundays. That philosophy can only work in a congregation where longer term members feel nourished and cared for. If they do not, the odds are better than even that longer term members will find a way to minimize congregational growth.

And so it is that a few strands of the interdependent web of life reveal themselves to us in this microcosm: Newcomers can only be spiritually nourished and cared for if longer term members feel nourished and cared for. There is room for all of us, and there is room for temporarily empty chairs, as well.

May we trust each other enough to share reservations. May we talk about our hopes for this congregation. May we come to a sense of mission. May it be so!