

The Congregation We Can Become

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[The Unitarian Church in Summit NJ USA](#)

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When I first visited Summit, New Jersey, nearly five years ago, it was at the invitation of the search committee which had been charged with finding a new minister to serve this congregation. I soon discovered that it was the second such committee to be charged with the task, the original search committee having been unable to agree upon a candidate. I remember that my visit with the committee was friendly and cordial, that they had arranged to hear me preach at the Unitarian Church in Princeton, that on the way back from Princeton the committee, traveling in two cars, became separated, and we had a complicated time trying to get back together again. I have a vague recollection of a great deal of conversation about the history of the church, and about my experience over the years of my ministry, about what they wanted in a minister, and what I had to offer this kind of church.

The one exchange which stands out most clearly in my memory occurred when I asked the committee what future they envisioned for the Unitarian Church in Summit. Hank MacDonald, who has since retired and moved to California, responded instantly. "I want the Unitarian Church in Summit to become the 'flagship church' of the Unitarian Universalist movement in New Jersey," he said. Obviously, I was impressed with the speed of his answer and the passion it revealed. I remember asking what that meant--to be the flagship church of the movement. He talked about the Summit Church becoming the standard by which Unitarian Universalism would be known and judged in this area. He wanted a church committed to excellence--excellence in its music, excellence in its program of education for children, excellence in the pulpit and in its worship services. He talked about a church which would be open to new people, to new ideas, in which a free exchange of opinions would be encouraged. He talked about a church woven into the fabric of the community, and respected by the community for its commitment to reason and freedom and tolerance. He concluded by saying again, the Unitarian Church in Summit should be the flagship church of the denomination in New Jersey.

A lot of things have happened over the intervening years. I don't know whether we have become the "Flagship Church" that Hank MacDonald dreamed about. I do know that we continue to pursue the vision of excellence he offered. If there is any area in which we have come close to achieving that vision, it is probably to be found in the music program of the church--a program which not only enriches our services of worship, but which reaches out to the community in a significant way. But Flagship Church or not, however you evaluate these past few years, one fact is indisputably clear: this congregation has changed significantly over the past few years. From an adult membership of just over 350, we have grown to an adult membership of almost 500. Our church school enrollment has grown from 50 to nearly 150. Our average attendance at church services has

increased from 130 on a Sunday morning to 200. Our church school has moved to double sessions in order to accommodate increased attendance. Over the course of these few years, we have become the largest Unitarian Universalist congregation in the state and the third or fourth largest Unitarian Universalist congregation in the Metropolitan New York District.

This growth has caused some important changes in this congregation and the way we function. To begin with, we are a younger congregation than we were just a few years ago. This is not to say that our stalwart long-time members have lost their interest in the church, nor is it to suggest that they are not critically important in the life of the church. It is simply to suggest that we have been attracting younger members and they have brought with them a new sense of enthusiasm and possibility. The second thing that has happened is that the congregation has ceased to be a Summit church in a variety of ways. Five years ago, half of our membership or more lived in Summit. Today only a quarter of our members live in Summit. The rest come from fifty-two different communities. We have become a regional church, serving a large area in north-central New Jersey and with responsibilities and concerns beyond the boundaries of this town. The third thing that has happened is that as we have responded to the needs and the desires of a larger, more diverse congregation, the activity level of the church has increased substantially. Just out of curiosity, I compared our most recent newsletter with the newsletters covering the same time period four years ago. During this period four years ago, we listed in the calendar a total of six upcoming programs. This year, we listed a total of eighteen. The church has become larger, the church has become more diverse; the church has become busier.

At the same time, the church has become more involved in the community outside the church. We have a small, but faithful group who are regular volunteers at the food bank; we have a large group who work four weeks a year to house the homeless of Union County; we have accepted responsibility for outreach to our Partner-Church in Transylvania; we have instituted an alternative Christmas Gift Program; we have become a fair-share supporter of the Unitarian Universalist Association; we have a score of people who have volunteered to work, one-on-one with the homeless in Plainfield. And, of course, as always, there are a great many of our members who volunteer in their communities in ways we seldom know about.

All of these changes have had significant consequences for us as an institution. The most obvious consequence, of course, can be seen and heard and felt at the coffee hour between services on Sunday morning. Most Sundays, the room is too crowded to be comfortable. People jostle each other, attempt to carry on a conversation despite the noise, try to drink a cup of coffee without spilling it on themselves or someone else. There is little opportunity to sign people up for programs, or to greet new people and make them feel welcome, or really see the fine art which is on display in the Jacob Trapp Gallery, or browse the book table. The little house was not designed to accommodate so many people. And while it is nice to be in a place where Unitarian Universalists actually constitute a crowd, it is also difficult if you are new, or if you are not young and agile, or if you cannot hear very well. And certainly, if you are on crutches or in a wheel-chair, it

is down-right dangerous. Increasingly, we look at each other and murmur, "We have to do something about this." But the fact is, we haven't been able to figure out just what we ought to be doing.

And of course, space problems afflict the church school as well. The usable space at Unitarian House is full. We have had to limit the numbers in classes, and shift families from one time slot to another, and still we have classes meeting in spaces which are simply inadequate. And, of course, there is no place where we can meet as a whole congregation for dinner or any other social occasion. The space pressures are felt in the church office, where we have been forced to develop elaborate procedures to make certain that we do not schedule two programs in the same space at the same time. Our success is welcome, but it brings with it some stress and strain. And our efforts to resolve some of the space problems are delayed by the need to proceed through the city's thicket of legalities.

There is another kind of stress and strain we have been experiencing of late--one which we discuss only obliquely. Those who are long-time members of the church may be feeling that this institution has begun to slip away from them. There was a time, not very long ago, when members of this congregation could come to church on Sunday morning and know just about everybody. There was a time when a member of this congregation could expect to sit in the same chair week after week--not that there was a reserved sign on it, but simply that everyone knew that it was her chair. There was a time when a member of this church could come to a program and expect to see most of his church friends at the meeting, because almost everyone attended almost everything. There was a time when much of the news of the church could be spread informally, because most of the members lived in the same town, and encountered each other at supermarkets and at the bank or in community meetings. There was a time when everyone knew who was doing what in the church, and it was easy to participate in the process.

It is not like that any more. Long-time members of the church sometimes stand in the coffee hour with a bemused expression on their faces, and say to me, "I don't know most of these people. Oh, it's great that there are so many new people, but I don't know most of them." Sitting up here on the platform, I am able to watch on Sunday mornings the confusion on the face of a long-time member who comes into the church and walks down the aisle only to see that some one else is already firmly ensconced in the chair which is usually his. Members of the church comment to me that they don't know what is going on in the church, that the Order of Service is too full--there are too many announcements, it is too complicated, that the Newsletter has become a book, that they don't have time to read through it. They apologize that they have not the time or the energy to attend all the programs, to participate in everything the church has to offer. And sometimes they are just a little disappointed when they do attend a program and discover that their special friends in the church are not there, that they have chosen to participate in some other church activities instead. And sometimes they are just a little angry that the church seems always to be asking for time or money for this project or that project--they cannot support every undertaking but they feel that they have failed a moral responsibility if they do not.

The point to all of this is that our congregation has crossed a threshold in its life; we have come to a time when we must decide what kind of institution we are going to be, and what values we are going to serve. I would like to believe that some of our growth is the result of the fact that we have reached for that excellence which Hank MacDonald talked of years ago. But I am also aware that in some ways, our growth over the past few years has happened in spite of us. It is part of a pattern which other Unitarian Universalist Churches in this area seem to be experiencing as well. We are uniquely positioned within the religious spectrum to serve a population which, for a variety of reasons, is not comfortable in the main-line religious denominations. Perhaps they represent a so-called mixed marriage, a merger of diverse religious backgrounds. Perhaps they are in a second marriage which other churches may not recognize. Perhaps they are gay or lesbians and are seeking a religious community which will not reject them but will affirm their affectional orientation. Perhaps they are seeking a spiritual element in their lives which honors their own searching rather than dictating the path they must follow. Perhaps they are birth-right Unitarian Universalists who now seek a nurturing religious home for their own children. Whatever the reason, Unitarian Universalism, which values the worth of the individual while seeking to provide a community of support and challenge, provides the kind of religious home they are seeking, and they come to us and we have an obligation to reach out to such people, and offer them room here, in this special, holy place.

But if we are to serve each other and the community well, if we are to remain open to those who need this kind of religious institution, we must recognize that we are no longer the little community church we once were. We have become a different institution. And that requires that we shift our understanding of who we are and what we are about. To begin with, we need to give up the comfortable self-image of a struggling little congregation which never has the resources to do what it dreams of doing. The fact is that we are a strong and vital institution, that our limits are defined more by imagination than anything else, and that our strength and vitality impose upon us responsibilities which are greater than simply institutional survival. We must become, in fact, what we have been in theory--a force in the community which champions freedom, reason, tolerance in human relationships, which seeks equity and mercy and justice in social structures, which speaks for those who are often voiceless and without advocates. We must become a haven for those who are seeking a spiritual dimension in life, and for those who are in crisis and need the support of a caring community, and for those who cannot accept the conventional wisdom and who feel alone and isolated in the world and need a congregation of fellow searchers. And we must become a place where diversity flourishes, where different opinions and viewpoints are not only tolerated, but are welcomed and engaged so that new insights and new understandings may emerge among us and new truths may be embraced.

If that is to happen, we need to embrace the fact that we will be one congregation composed of many smaller groups. Not everyone will be willing, able or interested in doing everything in the church. Not everyone will know everyone else. Not every enthusiasm will attract the support of all the members of the church. And that is all right. Some people will want to participate only in the Sunday morning service. Others will want to participate in some other facet of the life of the church. In practice this means that

I may not be able to give the time to the program for housing the homeless that someone else is eager to give. Or I may not be able to give up Sunday morning so I can rehearse with and sing in the choir. Or I may not be able to give a Saturday morning a month to help at the food bank. Or I may choose to give a portion of my discretionary income to the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee or to some other cause rather than to the Transylvania Partner Church project. Or I may choose to give time to teach in the church school and may not have time or energy to attend the auction or the fund-raising dinner, or the People's Party. But while I cannot participate in everything, I support those who are involved in church projects, and I am proud of their accomplishments, and I take delight in their success, and I am eager to see them succeed, for in their success, I, too am involved. In some sense, they act in my behalf, just as I act in their behalf in other areas of the life of the church.

In short, for good or for ill, the model of a family where everyone knows everyone else and all work together on the same projects is no longer appropriate to our situation. We have become a congregation, a community--a gathering of people who share fundamental values, but whose different interests and skills and resources dictate that they shall serve those values in a variety of different ways. This kind of community requires that we find more structured ways of enabling friendships and relationships, of sharing information, of discussing our alternatives, of reaching our decisions. The informal patterns which served us well as a smaller church do not serve us well now. We need to invite wider participation in the democratic processes by which the life of the total institution is shaped and formed.

We are beginning that process now. The long range planning committee has been charged to develop a methodology by which we can think together about the kind of church we have been, the kind of church we are, the kind of congregation we can become. Following this service, we will begin that process by constructing together a time-line history of the church and our involvement in it. In the next few weeks, we will be meeting in small neighborhood groups to develop a vision of what this church means to us, what we want it to become. That information will be fed back to the board and to the long-range planning committee to attempt to build a vision of what we must do to be the congregation we want to be.

We have behind us a proud history. This is the church of F. Carlton Doan and A. Powell Davies and Jacob Trapp. This is the church of men and women who have understood their heritage of freedom and reason and tolerance and who have stood by that heritage even when it has been uncomfortable. This is the church of women and men who have worked to make this place responsive and responsible to the larger community. This is a church which has pursued excellence in its own internal life and has sought to deal kindly with those in pain and sorrow. This is a congregation with a great future before it. I look at this congregation, and I dream Hank MacDonald's dream, too. I see here, on this corner a church that is open to all, that welcomes new and provocative ideas, which provides its many members a variety of avenues of participation, and which suggests multiple ways of living out our religious values and beliefs, within the church and in the larger community. I see here a congregation which is not only the "flagship church" of

Unitarian Universalism, but a model for all to see of what it means to be an open, exciting, relevant religious community in this post-traditional, post-modern age. That is the mission to which we are called. That is the opportunity which lies before us. That is the congregation I hope we will become.