

Growing a Church

**Rev. Stephen Ames (formerly Landale)
The Unitarian Universalist Church in Eugene
October 4, 2009**

Call to Worship

May we be reminded here of our highest aspirations... #434

Opening Hymn

“Come, Come, Whoever You Are” (Rumi/Ungar), #188

Meditation

“The Growing Season” by Sara Moores Campbell¹

“I am not religious” says my neighbor, as he hoes the rows between his beans and corn.

“Oh yes, you are,” I say to myself.

To plant a seed is an act of faith.

To collect compost is a response of gratitude to the creator.

To water, fertilize, and mulch the ground is an expression of religious responsibility.

To kneel down and pull weeds is a prayer.

To harvest is to participate in the fullness and grace of the spirit.

To protect and replenish creation is to love God.

“I am not religious,” says my neighbor.

Yes, you are, I say.

Reading

“Stand by This Faith” by Olympia Brown, #569

Choral Anthem

“Go Out!” words by John Murray, music by Elizabeth Eleandar

¹ from Montgomery, Kathleen, ed. *100 Meditations*.

Sermon
“Growing a Church”
Rev. Stephen Ames, UU Church in Eugene
10/4/09

As many of you know, over the past ten years, this congregation has doubled in size. The 11 a.m. service is usually close to capacity, except for Centennial Sunday two weeks ago when many eleven a.m. regulars showed up at 9 a.m. in response to repeated warnings that 11 a.m. might be packed. So on September 20, 9 a.m. was jam-packed and 11 a.m., merely full. Downstairs, our religious education classes are often full. More people want Unitarian Universalism in this area than we can currently accommodate.

This church has grown through the efforts of people who define themselves as religious and people who do not -- people who say they are not religious and yet plant seeds, pull weeds, and other acts of faith. The people who began planning for our Centennial over a year ago: filled with faith! (Even though some of them I find charmingly cynical). The people who have led our property search process, who helped the congregation explore options before our May 2007 vote to find a new property: filled with faith. All of you who have made financial contributions, stretching yourselves during lean times; all of you who have contributed your talents and time, laughter and tears: filled with faith. All of you who have served on the Board, as did Suzanne Whaley, or in Stewardship or on the Budget Committee: ever faithful. All of you who have nurtured and guided our young or helped our church in any number of ways: thank you for your faithfulness. You have invested yourselves in this community, as does a gardener, with the faith that with your efforts, combined with sunshine, rain, and the efforts of others, something beautiful, something nourishing will grow. And, for many, your efforts and faith are rooted in gratitude for what you have already experienced here.

Our efforts are necessary and, at the same time, insufficient. We help our garden grow when we work in cooperation with nature, with the Spirit of Life.

From my first year of gardening -- to be more accurate, being assistant gardener in my family -- I've been amazed at the bounty of some plants and disappointed at the pitiful yield of others. Our large tomato plant, well-watered and healthy looking, has produced two small tomatoes in six months. Meanwhile, the lily bulbs planted in the front of the house just weeks ago, have sprouts a foot tall. Kale and cauliflower in the garden beds grew tall and strong, while struggling in other parts of the yard. Lesson learned: Oregon soil often needs some help.

Sometimes growth seems to happen of its own accord; other times growth requires faithful attention and a little bit more: study. Observation, experimentation, advice from friends, books, magazines, the internet. *We are not the first people to attempt to grow tomatoes, cauliflower, and kale in Oregon! We are not the first people to notice that many things do not grow easily in this soil!*

We help our garden grow more effectively when we study gardens like ours that grow well. This helps us anticipate and work with the patterns that are likely to be in place.

My sermon this morning is about how we grow this church.

You may wonder, “*Why* should we grow this church?” There are many reasons, which I will address more fully on November 1, but for now I offer this: We should grow this church so we can offer what we have to more people. Far more people want liberal religion like ours in our area than we can accommodate.

You may then wonder, “Well, the church seems to be growing on its own quite fine, thank you. What's the problem?” Well, the first problem -- delightful challenge we might better call it -- is that we're growing like a huge tomato plant that has outgrown its pot. Looks big and beautiful, but can't be sustained healthily in its older, smaller pot. So we've responded to that challenge by looking carefully for a bigger pot. We've found one that we're now seriously considering as our new home.

The second delightful challenge we face is that we've been growing and growing but keeping many of our expectations of the church the same. A mid-size church is not the same thing as a small church with more people. It functions very differently. It meets many different needs, and core needs are met to different degrees. Churches that grow without changing the ways they function, without changing the roles and expectations of leaders, without changing their sense of purpose, tend to cave in on themselves. Leaders burn out. Members clash with one another and with leaders over conflicting expectations and goals: expectations that are often unspoken and even unrecognized by those who hold them. Churches that grow without changing their orientation tend to revert to their prior size, after damaging conflicts, the loss of many of their best leaders, and damage to their reputation and integrity.

Turns out, we can learn about these pitfalls, and, better yet, learn about how to foster growth healthily, the same way we can learn better gardening techniques: by learning from others. Most helpful among our resources are the congregational growth experts -- ministers and lay people who have spent decades studying the stages of church growth.

(I will use the words “congregation” and “church” interchangeably, but keep in mind that everything I share applies to congregations of other types: fellowships, synagogues, temples, etc.).

A surprisingly strong consensus exists among such people that there are four distinct sizes and functions of congregations. From smallest to largest, they are the family-size congregation, the pastoral congregation, the program congregation, and the resource (or corporate) congregation. There is also a surprisingly strong consensus that the most difficult transition is from the pastoral congregation to the program congregation.

Guess where we are folks? Right in the middle of that transition, from pastoral to program.

Family-sized churches, the smallest, tend to be run by a few families, often with a part-time clergy who pastors and preaches but doesn't really call the shots. Many of these ministers are fresh out of seminar, while many others are close to retirement and glad to work part-time. In either case, ministries longer than five or six years are unusual. Family churches are like extended families: everyone has a role, but it's probably not written down. They are hard to join, but when you're in, you're in. Rites of passage – weddings, memorial services, etcetera – are central events. Mission statements are unheard of or ignored.

When the congregation grows to about one hundred members, and new committees form, and people start thinking about bylaws and mission statements and such, only a full-time paid clergy can keep track of it all, and keep each part of the congregation in touch with what the others are doing. The pastor is then the hub, the figure-head, and, well, the pastor: visiting members and families, not just for emergencies, and not just for important church meetings. The Pastoral Church. Dozens if not a hundred or more people think of the pastor as their friend. And while the pastor is often good at making it seem that others are making the decisions, leaders generally know that the pastor calls the shots in the pastoral church.

In a program church, the congregation has grown too large for any single person to keep track of anything. There are too many people for a minister to visit in the hospital and in their homes, so the church either hires a second pastoral care professional, or the minister trains lay people to be pastoral associates, or both. Program-church ministers who function as they did in a pastoral ministry burn out quickly, as they try to do too much themselves and connect with too many people in too short a time. Successful program ministers are mentors who train others in the arts of ministry. Pastoral ministry emphasizes relating, embracing, comforting, supporting. Program ministry emphasizes motivating, inspiring, training, and crafting.

In the pastoral congregation, the emphasis is on community. People talk about how great it is to be at their church, for its warmth and sense of community. Members of many years can know most if not close to all of the names of other members. People talk about their church as if it were unique -- and yet most congregations of this size, thousands of them, in every denomination, do this! In many ways, aspects of the family church continue in the pastoral church, to lesser degrees: a preference for informal roles and processes, emphasis on a family feeling.

In a program congregation, many members still want to like their minister and want their church to feel like a warm community. But the importance of these things slips from essential to valuable. In a healthy, thriving program church, people feel most excited and most loyal from two things: the excellence of the church's programs, and the strength of the church's vision.

In a healthy, thriving program church, people are stretched beyond themselves on a regular basis. While they are accepted for who they are, they are also challenged to be more accepting of others. Program congregations actively strive to serve the larger community in a variety of ways: through service, advocacy, the arts, and more. People say of a program congregation they love something like this: "I'm proud to be part of that church because of its superb religious education for my children and the social witness we're providing this city. Every week, I'm reminded to be my best."

Often, you can hear someone talk about their healthy program church for a while before you hear a word about the minister -- although you will probably hear about the worship services, which the minister leads. You may also hear such a congregant speak for a while without saying anything about "community" -- but conveying a sense of vitality that is surely creating community, or communities, in its wake.

Personality – whether it is of a leader or the group – is less important to a healthy program congregation. Vision, commitment, and excellence: these take center stage.

Rev. Robert Latham, author of "Moving On From Church Folly Lane: The Pastoral-to-Program Shift," describes an important difference in the relationship to community in this transition. In the pastoral congregation, "Community" is the end goal and is regularly celebrated. In the program congregation, the focus is on the church's mission, and community is a by-product. Yet, ironically, when community is a by-product of a group of people working together towards a healthy vision, it is a much stronger form of community than when people seek community for its own sake.

Latham's words remind me of the Black Church in the Civil Rights Movement, which, led by Rev. Dr. King sought to end racial discrimination and enter a new Promised Land, for millions of people. They kept their Eyes on the Prize while singing, "We Shall Overcome." Community in the present was not the goal, but a by-product of working together towards a vision, in a church of shared values, stories, and song. The transition of any church from pastoral to program is generally one of turning outward -- not as a collection of individuals but as a church with a vision, rooted in its faith and heritage.

I quote at length now from Latham on the Pastoral-to-Program transition:

There is nothing inherently better or worse about either the Pastoral Congregation or Program Congregation. Much can be said for the mutual affirmation, support, comfort, and embracing community atmosphere of the Pastoral Congregation in a world increasingly estranged and chaotic.

Yet, much can also be said for the excitement, growth energy, and capacity to inspire transformation of the Program Congregation in a world in desperate need of spiritual guidance. Thus, while no one would deny that something significant is lost in the transition between a Pastoral Congregation and a Program Congregation, it must also be admitted that something significant is gained. Any life transition is endowed with simultaneous loss and gain. It is important to acknowledge both. It is this principle of trade-off that must be kept in mind as the issues of the shift are engaged. Otherwise, those enamored of the benefits of the pastoral mode of ministry will only see the loss without seeing the gain, and the will to refocus may also be lost.²

² from Latham, Robert T. *Moving On from Church Folly Lane: The Pastoral to Program Shift*.

I have been going through an adjustment as well as I have been transitioning from being a family-to-pastoral church minister to a pastoral-to-program-church minister. The Ministerial Search Committee picked up on it, asking how I would adjust to having other work demands take precedence over pastoral care. I replied that it was a necessary loss. I liked "being there" for people and knew I would continue to do some pastoral care in this church, but not as much: I would need to train others to do some of the visiting as well, and then keep working with them. Before arriving here in Eugene, I had set a goal of establishing a Pastoral Associates program.

Still, in my first few months here I worked 60-plus hour weeks, including a lot more visiting than I would be able to sustain. I don't regret that time, even if I couldn't keep it up. But I have needed to let go of frequent longer visits, and it's been an adjustment for me. I've been learning the art of briefer pastoral conversations, connecting with people between meetings and so forth. I'm still learning, still adjusting, but it's worth it.

When I sit down to work with the Worship Associates, Pastoral Associates, Small Group Ministry facilitators, I feel the joy of helping others minister, and knowing that far more people are touched by these ministries than I could possibly reach myself. When I hear one of our choirs sing, or hear how much a small group or class has meant to someone, even if I took no direct part in that group, I feel satisfaction. And I will take great pride when we become more strongly engaged with the larger community, as servant and voice of liberal religious values, building on the connections we've started to make.

Each stage of congregational growth -- like each stage of life -- has its necessary losses and gains. When a group or individual grows without letting go, it remains stuck -- it doesn't truly transition and reap the benefits of the next stage. Congregations that grow in numbers without transitioning to the next stage, become stuck -- too big to do what they used to do well -- provide intimacy and a warm, organic, informal community - but not doing what the next stage provides: excellent programs that provide spiritual depth; a variety of mini-congregations, such as choirs, that provide informal connecting in the context of service and growth; and a variety of ministries that meet real needs.

I will offer a more detailed presentation at the Coordinating Council meeting on Saturday, November 14. After each service today, a couple of Board members and members of the Committee on Congregational Ministry will be available in the library to talk with you about this transition, to answer your questions as best they can.

So, how can we grow this church healthily?

- Embrace the benefits of the stage of growth we're entering, and lessen our attachment to the benefits of the stage we're leaving. We may need to grieve the loss of our pastoral church.
- See how many of the things we may have valued in the smaller church are present in different forms in a thriving mid-size, or program, church. Intimacy in small groups, for instance.
- Let go of knowing everyone's name and expecting most others to know yours.

- Let go of the expectation that people will chase you down if you skip a few weeks, or that the minister or anyone else will know if something is wrong in your life if you don't tell them... or if you want that kind of community, find it in the many small communities in the church: men's groups and women's groups, for instance. Take responsibility for communicating your needs to the people who can help you.
- Embrace the human connection and spiritual growth you may find in a Small Group Ministry, Adult Religious Education class or other venue.
- Embrace clear procedures and rules for accountability, making it easier for new people to step in and contribute. Let go of attachment to informality in process. Embrace clarity, transparency, and accountability as spiritual practices.
- Come to appreciate that the program church minister's job is primarily to motivate, inspire, train, craft, and lead.
- Know that your minister putting most of his time into supporting and leading quality programs of spiritual value is a form of love. It has come to feel more loving to me than being THE ONE that everyone needs to see, be with, or talk to. Working behind the scenes to help you minister to one another is something that brings me great satisfaction and meaning... and I sincerely believe it is what this congregation most needs of its minister as it becomes more fully a program church.

Most of all, we can grow this church by turning outwards in service to the larger community. As Reverend Peter Morales, President of the UUA, asked us, What are we called to be? Who are we called to be? The more deeply we explore these questions, and the more we live in response to our answers, the more we will grow in service to others.

For a brief prayer this morning, I invite you, not for the last time, to reflect on these questions: What are we called to be? Who are we called to be?

Let's take a moment to sit with these questions, in prayerful meditation...

... Amen.

Closing Hymn

This Little Light of Mine, #118

Benediction

JohnMurray, "Go out in the highways and by-ways...", #704

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