

# Growing Our Faith through Growing Our Numbers

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## Opening Words from A. Powell Davies

“There are millions of Unitarians in America today, but not in Unitarian churches. There are millions of Unitarian [Universalists] who do not know its history. They do not know its basis. They do not know its purpose. They do not know that they themselves are Unitarian [Universalists]. If...[our] religion is to shape the world to peace and freedom, these people must be joined together to advance its cause.

Religions with worn-out creeds cannot do it. Ir-religion cannot do it. Confused religions cannot do it. If the strength of a free person’s faith is to be the under-girding of the world tomorrow, a world so full of dangers, yet so rich in opportunities, and if the people of America must rise to take their place within this venture, then there must be hundreds of new churches, and multitudes of pioneers. This will come about partly if Unitarian [Universalists] will preach their faith, for there are many who are ready to hear it. But it will come about most surely if Unitarian [Universalists] are willing to live their faith....”

## Reading from Roy D. Phillips

“Unitarian Universalists are proud of themselves for doing nothing to seek converts to their faith. A person’s religion is a private inward thing, it is said, and we should in no way seek to influence another person to choose our way in religion. The underlying principle here is respect for the privacy and the integrity of the other, and such respect is certainly an admirable quality.

The problem with this stand we take is found in that premise about religion being a private, inward, solitary phenomenon. I submit that this idea is out-of-date. Rather, systems-theory holds...that there is no such thing as utter personal isolation. Not even in our inwardness is any one of us an island. Our personal spiritual orientation arises in a social context. The question, then, is: Shall the Unitarian Universalist way in religion be offered as part of others’ social context? My answer is an unequivocal “Yes”.

I don’t intend to try to talk anybody into being a Unitarian Universalist. But I do want UU-talk going on in our community—a good deal of it, if possible. My reasoning for this is that on any given day there will be a number of people out there verging on a point of view very like the stance we Unitarian Universalists take. Left to themselves on their given day, they may well evaluate their dawning point of view as unacceptably eccentric and unworthy; or, worse perhaps, they may accept the mainline evaluation of their new outlook as sinful and may suppose there is something fundamentally amiss within them since they are coming to look at things this new way....

There are those out there who need to know there is a way in religion such as ours, that it has a long and noble tradition and that it is represented in our day by a lively community of faithful adherents.

For this reason...I am talking a good deal about our way in religion and I hope you are doing that, too. You never know who out there this very moment is in need of hearing about what we have discovered in religion. I say: Don't keep it for yourself and for a few others alone. Share the wealth!"

**Reading** from William Burnside Miller in *Salted With Fire*, pp. 150-151

“Congregational growth is of deep concern to all of us committed to the future of our free faith. We have found something of great spiritual value, and we wish to share it with others. Traditionally the best way of accomplishing this has been through institutional growth. In a sense, if we do not grow, we are passing a terrible judgment on ourselves and the choices we have made. If our faith is truly wonderful, then this should be more widely recognized. It is my belief that our hitherto lackluster growth record has been primarily the result of a dangerous institutional mythology. Perhaps the most dangerous of all myths is the belief that we want to grow. From personal observation I can attest that growth is the farthest thing from the minds of some liberal religionists. Many of our societies operate as private clubs open to members only. After all, if you have discovered “Truth,” “Beauty,” and “Right” and know that only a small elite can possibly attain that goal, then surely you do not want to be sullied by the intellectually, spiritually, or culturally unwashed.

We smugly congratulate ourselves on our rejection of proselytizing, grandly affirming a gracious tolerance of differing points of view. We then sit content with our small numbers, knowing that our way can only appeal to people who are truly superior, which is to say people just like us. After all, if small is beautiful, then tiny must be terrific.

Let us explode the growth myth once and for all. Let us recognize that there are many UU societies that do not wish to grow. This

does not mean that members of such congregations are traitors to the cause. It simply means they are choosing a different way to live out their faith. Indeed, their way has been the norm for decades. Ministries of maintenance are enthusiastically embraced by many of our churches.”

### **Sermon**

In the year 1887 in Manchester, Massachusetts something very sad happened. Twin infants, Samuel and Elizabeth Bradford died. As a memorial gift, their parents gave the First Unitarian Church of their town this silver communion decanter. The Bradfords loved their children; they cared for their church too. Unfortunately, that church no longer exists; it also died. The only thing left is this lovely communion decanter, a lonely vestige of the love of the Bradford family and the consoling value of their religious community.

One family alone cannot save a church. It takes the commitment of many people. One congregation alone cannot change a country, but together we can make a difference. Just as individuals need families to survive, and families need communities for support and encouragement, so a church needs an association of congregations to be strong and influential.

Today we celebrate Association Sunday to affirm our common bonds and purposes with our Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. We are better together as individual congregations because we assist more people more effectively; and we are better together as an association of congregations because together we have more influence on a country that dearly needs more inclusive, spiritual values.

The Unitarian Church in Manchester, Massachusetts no longer exists. I'm glad this church exists, and I am certain you are too.

I'm glad that our other congregations exist as well. For example, the First Universalist Church in Wausau, Wisconsin—because that congregation changed my life; they made it much better.

As a teenager in the 1960s the songs of Bob Dylan had a lasting influence on me. It was a tumultuous time of change, as Dylan sang, “The old road is rapidly fading. So, get out of the new way, if you can't lend a hand, for the times they are a-changing.” For many, adolescence is a time to question the status-quo; it certainly was for me, and my friends. We questioned everything: our parents, teachers, the government, the socio-economic order, the War in Vietnam, the draft. Another Dylan song declared: “You are either busy being born, or you're busy dying!” At that time, I wasn't sure which I was going to be doing.

Fortunately, it was also a time of idealism. President Kennedy asked us to consider what we could do for our country, and President Johnson invited us to imagine a “Great Society.” We did; we imagined “a world without war”; we came together, recruited others; we marched and protested, and eventually we brought that war to an end.

It seems to me that once again we need to “Grow Our Faith,” in the goodness of life, in peace, in others, in ourselves, and the good we should, and can do for our country, and world. Bob Dylan's songs gave me hope because they proclaimed that love, peace, justice, freedom, and reason were the right values to affirm, so did my discovery of the First Universalist Church of Wausau, Wisconsin. They took me in, and kept me “busy being born.”

That church accepted me as I was, a non-believer in traditional theology; but they also challenged me to keep open to new possibilities in religion, society, and myself. That church gave me freedom, a sense of purpose, and hope. I chose to go into the UU ministry because I wanted to help make the world a better place,

and to keep growing intellectually, morally, spiritually. They taught me about the possibility of registering as a conscientious objector. (My earlier religious community had not mentioned that possibility.) I cannot say for a literal fact that the Unitarian Universalist Association saved my life, but I know it has saved others, and that it encouraged me to believe in life and to get busy-making it better.

I am grateful for that First Universalist Church, and it is incumbent on me to support the growth of our liberating movement. Unitarian Universalism empowered me; it was here for me when I needed it, and I believe we have a responsibility to offer its sustaining and empowering influence to more people, and to our country. Unitarian Universalism encouraged me to grow; it calls us all to grow; in fact, growth is integral to our way in religion.

Unitarian Universalists acknowledge human responsibility to save the world. Most of us do not believe in a supernatural omnipotent deity that will bring peace to earth without our cooperation. The purpose of our religion is moral development not just personal salvation. Unlike other religions that claim they have the one and only truth, we say everyone has some; we come together to share ours, and learn from others; we come together to grow.

There is a story my memory says was written by one of our ministers, Clinton Lee Scott, as one of his “Parish Parables.” It is told about a religious leader who noticed one of his members was no longer attending services at the temple. He sent a messenger to inquire the reason. The man told the messenger that he wasn't coming to services anymore because the clergy's comments only caused him to have more questions. He said, our minister leads us out into deep waters and then leaves us there to drown. When the religious leader heard this he sent the messenger back to him saying, “Tell he who stays away from the services that the temple

does not exist as a life preserver, but rather to teach people how to swim.”

That’s us. That is what we try to do. Encourage people to keep learning and growing. That opportunity is one reason most of us came to this religious community: we did not find the traditional answers efficacious, so we came to a community where we could be honest, and free to learn, and grow. It’s who we are as individuals, and as a people of faith.

The Unitarian spirit is exemplified in the words of a young girl quoted by Bruce Southworth, one of our ministers. She “returned from her first day at kindergarten, and her parents asked what she learned. ‘Not enough, not enough. I have to keep going back.’ “Revelation is not sealed,” as one of our hymns proclaims. We know truth takes a lot of work to be revealed; we believe in the need to keep learning, growing.

Personal growth is integral to our way in religion. Why not institutional growth? Why not share the faith and increase our effectiveness when in fact the world awaits us—needs us? Larry Peers, who once served in our extension department wrote, “We live in a time that has the largest number of unchurched people than in any previous time. When this unchurched population is interviewed, it is discovered that many of them would be interested in a faith much like that of Unitarian Universalism, if they but knew it.” (Salted With Fire, p. 70)

Don’t we have a responsibility to let them know we exist? The liberal religious community accepted me, and helped me develop. Unitarian Universalism encourages us, and challenges us, not only to accept, but to reach out to others.

Our country and our world today seem even more turbulent, conflicted, and dangerous than it did in the sixties. A religion that

encourages a rational response, an inclusive reaction to diversity and conflict is needed now more than ever. The religious right has grown, organized and influenced our political process; compared to them we are “missing in action.”

The world does not need more partisans who proclaim the supremacy of one ideology over others. It needs more people who acknowledge “the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” and who have “respect for the interdependent web of all existence....” I believe the world would be a better place with more people affirming the values and principles of Unitarian Universalism. I imagine you believe it too...and yet we seem reluctant to share our faith.

Scott Alexander states the problem clearly in his book encouraging UU evangelism: “Unitarian Universalists are notoriously spiritually silent. Because we demand to think for ourselves, are respectful of human differences, and don’t appreciate it when someone else tries to ram their own beliefs down our throats, we tend to shy away from even cautiously and respectfully sharing with others what it is we believe, and how those beliefs help us strive to be better, larger people. It is hard for some of us to talk back to fundamentalism by ‘talking up’ our own faith, but I passionately believe we cannot afford such a self-imposed silence in dangerous and divisive times such as these.” (pp.39-40.) He continues to say, “If we are not bold and caring enough to stand up in the public square and (without arrogance or vitriol) affirm what it is we believe and what dreams command our loyalty—then by default it will be the beliefs and dreams of others that will influence and instruct the shape of our society....” (p. 4.)

So there are several reasons why we should all work tirelessly to develop and extend Unitarian Universalism: One, because we are all people who believe in learning; two, because growth, spiritual and ethical, is integral to our understanding of the purpose of

religion; three, because there are people who need our supportive, and empowering community; four, because the world needs us, if it is to become more equitable, and peaceful. And, fifth, because as Bob Dylan put it: “You’re either busy being born, or you’re busy dying!” Which is this religious community? Which is our Association of Congregations, “Busy being born or busy dying”?

There are fewer Unitarian Universalist today than there were one hundred years ago. In the 1850s there were more than 500,000 Universalists alone, by the time of merger in 1961 there were only 68,000. At that time, we had 1035 congregations; today we have 1042. We have close to 160,000 members today, which is just slightly more than we did in 1961. For about the last 20 years our numbers have been increasing a tiny amount; last year we grew by ¾ of 1%; but we are decreasing as a portion of the U.S. population, which has grown exponentially; we have become insignificant. The average size of UU congregations is just over 100. The average UU is over 55 years old; and we only retain about 10 percent of our children. If we don’t get “Busy being born,” we are going to be “busy dying.”

The First Universalist Unitarian Church of Wausau, Wisconsin changed my life, made it better, made me better; it helped me grow. I don’t want to stop growing now. I don’t want my church, your church, our Association of Congregations, which have ministered unto us, sustained and empowered us; I don’t want them to stop growing now, and I hope you don’t want them to stop growing either.

The First Unitarian Church in Manchester, Massachusetts was also the last. This silver communion decanter is all that remains of that community; they did not grow their faith. We need to grow our faith in the goodness of life, and the human potential to make it better. There is a better world waiting to be born; it is waiting for us. We need to grow our faith in ourselves, in Unitarian

Universalism, in the UUA, and in our influence for good.

Unitarian Universalism gave me freedom and faith; it gives me hope. I was almost lost, but I was found; certainly there are many others with similar values and beliefs waiting to be found. Let us get busy being “born-again” Unitarian Universalists. Because creating a more welcoming and a larger, religious community would both deepen us spiritually, and extend our influence for good. Let us affirm the vision of our caring communities serving more people whose faith development can occur best through us; and let us affirm the vision of us as spiritually empowered people having more influence on our society by living our faith into the world.

For, as President Sinkford has said, “Now is the time for us to live up to the promise of our liberal religion, to let the world know we are here, and to welcome those who seek our community of peace, justice and love. Now is the time for our congregations to grow stronger and more effective because our religious values are sorely needed to help heal a wounded world.”

To do this effectively, we need to connect, affirm our common bonds and purposes, and combine our resources. We are better together. We need to have faith in one another. So I ask you to contribute generously to a special collection. We are asking everyone to try to give an average of \$50.00. There are envelopes in your orders of service. We hope to raise one million dollars from your congregation, and hundreds of other UU congregations across the country, and to use that money for new growth outreach projects.

Imagine 3 million UUs in the U.S., and more throughout the world. “The times are a-changing,” and we must change too to make them better times. We need to grow individually, as congregations, and as an Association of Congregations. Let us

“Grow Our Faith through Growing Our Numbers,” NOW! So we can “help heal a wounded world!” May it be so. Amen.

**Affirmation** from Scott Alexander

In a world with so much hatred and violence,  
*We need a religion that proclaims the inherent worth and dignity of every person.*

In a world with so much brutality and fear,  
*We need a religion that seeks justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.*  
In a world with so many persons abused and neglected,  
*We need a religion that calls us to accept one another and encourage one another to spiritual growth.*  
In a world with so much dogmatism and falsehood,  
*We need a religion that challenges us to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.*

In a world with so much tyranny and oppression,  
*We need a religion that affirms the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process.*  
In a world with so much inequality and strife,  
*We need a religion that strives toward the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.*  
In a world with so much environmental degradation,  
*We need a religion that advocates respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*  
In a world with so much uncertainty and despair,  
*We need a religion that teaches our hearts to hope and our hands to serve.*

Scott W. Alexander in *Salted With Fire*, Skinner House, 1984.