

TREES NEED A FOREST: HOW SMALL CHURCHES GROW  
Bob Weekley - October 30, 2005

Trees and forests

Please consider with me an apt - and beautiful - metaphor: trees and forests.

We enjoy the grace and beauty of trees. But they are transient individuals, and sometimes fragile. We can plant a tree and if we stay around long enough, and if it survives its lone existence, we can watch it grow to great beauty, and then, watch it weaken and die.

Forests, on the other hand, are some of nature's most awesome works. While trees are transient, forests are eternal.

Forests protect and shelter the individual trees.

Forests retain the water to nurture the individual trees when the drought comes.

Forests stabilize the land and the hillsides to protect the trees from being uprooted.

Forests provide a sheltered nursery for the tiny new trees struggling to get their roots.

How do the forests get started? By a few individual trees that take the initiative. It is a great challenge for a new tree to grow to maturity. [Discuss experience in deforested areas.]

And once started, how do the forests grow? Once enough trees have begun to stand together they reach a self-sustaining critical mass. So as individual trees age, or sicken, and die they merely change their form and become nourishment to sustain the forest with its younger trees. Yes, it is the old that nourish the young in an eternal cycle. But, if the small cluster of trees does not grow to a self-sustaining size it, it never becomes a beautiful forest and its vulnerable trees will eventually perish.

So we shall see in this metaphor of the trees and the forest a powerful relationship to the organizations built around the interrelations of human beings. I'm seeing specifically how this metaphor relates to the growth - and decline - of religious communities.

A church, spiritual aspects aside, is an organic entity. A church, like the forest, consists of individuals. Like the trees of the forest, the individuals are transient, fragile, subject to disappearing at any time. But the church, like the forest, has a life of its own. It is more than the sum of its individual constituents. It is the church that can flourish indefinitely without being bound by the limits of its fragile human constituents.

Also embedded in this metaphor is one of the immutable physical laws - nothing, no thing, ever remains as it is. Not a tree, not a person, and not an organization. Everything is growing or decaying, rising or falling, expanding or contracting, accelerating or decelerating. Trying to remain in a particular condition is like trying to balance a knife on its edge; the inputs and outputs of any organic system are never exactly equal. Growth and decline are both natural states. But staying the same - with no growth or decline - is an absolutely unnatural state -- contrary to nature.

The fellowship movement

This analogy of the trees and the forest is borne out by the Unitarian fellowship movement that started in the 1940's. At that time Unitarian churches were clustered mostly in the northeast region of the United States. But many people in this post World War II environment scattered across the country were finding that their own religious affiliation was not meeting their need for

greater spiritual understanding and for reconciliation with rational thought. In those days there were insufficient Unitarian ministers to meet these growing needs, so the American Unitarian Association in 1945 voted to explore forming lay-led centers in communities too small at that time to warrant a church. Thus was launched the Lay Fellowship Plan. A lay-Unitarian, Munroe Husbands, was appointed as the director of the new program.

Munroe Husbands was a modern version of the early Unitarian circuit riders. He would come into a town, book a public site, advertise the meetings, and meet with local people who wanted to form a fellowship. He would inspire them and help with the initial organization, and then he would move on.

As many as 600 new congregations were started this way. Initially lay-led, many later grew into full fledged churches with their own ministers. Some became so large and successful that they eventually subdivided into multiple Unitarian churches in the community.

But the record of the fellowship movement is a mixed bag. While some of those fellowships flourished and are great churches today, others remained small, withered away, and died. Why did some live and some die? Think of the trees in their struggle for survival before they become sheltered in a living and lasting forest. Four main reasons are cited.

- The first reason is the most common. Many fellowships wanted to stay small. They cherished the intimate and personal nature of their fellowship. So they did not pursue growth. They did not plan for growth. They focused on their own needs and did not devote their work to growth. But the founding pioneers eventually aged or moved away and the fellowship withered away.
- Some fellowships developed a creeping apathy. They got tired. They forgot their original vision, and love for the opportunity to belong to a fellowship. And not having worked hard enough to grow there was not enough new blood in the fellowship to energize the congregation.
- Another cause of decline was that some were dominated by a few people who wanted to control the fellowship. They had not learned our Unitarian Universalist principle number 5 which prescribes the "... use of the democratic process within our congregations..."
- And, like so many organizations, sometimes personality issues arose. As we know, there are always some people who rock the boat but if it is a small boat one or two people not only can rock the boat but can sink it. Some organizations can recover their balance after the boat has been rocked; others sink.

Happily, there were many success stories among these fellowships. There is one common theme to every single one of the success stories: the fellowships grew. The hardy "trees" that had originally sprouted and banded together gave way to a "forest" that was more lasting than any of the original "trees."

### Congregational growth theory

Those who study church growth have discovered a number of principles that seem to apply, regardless of which denomination. In their studies they have noted that the characteristics of church size seem to be clustered into four main types. They call these:

- The Family Church: Fewer than 100 average attendance
- The Pastoral Church: 100 to 200 average attendance
- The Program Church: 200 to 400
- The Corporate Church: More than 400

(These numbers are very approximate)

For our purposes here today we needn't study the Program Church nor the Corporate Church in detail. Suffice it to say, they are characterized by larger staffs and greater delegation of responsibilities. They are less personal but they have many more programs that bring groups within the church together. These large churches have the excitement of great preaching, inspiring musical programs, and comprehensive children and youth programs, truly becoming

family centers. These larger churches are clearly the established “forests” of my metaphor. They are bigger than a few individuals and they are rooted in the community for the long term.

Let’s look at the Family Church - those with fewer than 100 average attendance. These churches have their strengths and weaknesses as well. The main strength of these small churches is that the members are bound together by personal and emotional ties, and they are nourished by intimacy. Small churches serve as an important aspect of the social life of its members. There is little anonymity in such a church - visitors are recognized and everyone gets to know each other.

But the Family Church has its limitations.

- Can retain a small-church image. A struggling band.
- May be led by the same in-group year after year. Outsiders can be put off - feeling it is a private club. Develops an ‘ingrown’ nature.
- Out reach and marketing can be ineffective. People are content; they enjoy having their own needs met, but don’t bring in their friends and neighbors.
- Programs are lacking, such as a choir, youth groups, children’s programs and education, adult education, involvement in community and social justice actions, etc. In short, they don’t attract whole families.

The next step up we noted is the Pastoral Church - 100 plus average attendance. There are some of the older established churches with fewer members that have a minister because they have been long established, have already built a home-of-their-own, and are stable financially. With a minister many of the challenges of the Family Church are resolved or eased. Typically the Pastoral Church is

- Bound together by multiple subgroups. The pastor is the hub and the subgroups are the spokes.
- The Pastor is involved in everything.
- More people are involved in decision making. The work of the church is more widely distributed.
- Many more programs are institutionalized for adults, youth, and children that in-turn attract more individuals and families.
- Often the biggest problem confronting a church at this level, if it is growing, is the lack of adequate facilities.

### Paths to Growth

- 1) “First We Built a Sandbox.” Reading by Rev. Jane Rzepka
- 2) Homes
- 3) Rented space
- 4) Own space (first church) Opportunity to serve varied needs of the congregation when needed. (RE, weekday events, ... )
- 5) Administrator/part-time minister; lay minister
- 6) Minister - provides continuity and pastoral services. Becomes the “hub” of church.
- 7) (Typically newer churches can afford minister at about 125 regular attendees)
- 8) (Churches with 50 members or less, only 21 out of 373 have a minister.)
- 9) (Churches with budget of \$40,000 or less, only 19 out of 201 have a minister.)

### What Attracts People? What causes growth?

- First, and foremost - Unitarian Universalism. We are all on a spiritual journey and have found a place where we can listen to each other and understand each other. I will come back to this point.
- Services - inspirational, spiritual, and informative
- Children/family orientation
- Activities. Both whole fellowship activities and sub-groups
- Outreach
- Community - giving and voluntarism

- National and global social justice issues\_ an outlet for our need be involved in the ethical and moral issues of our time that extend beyond the local community
- A desire to grow

The hurricane analogy.

Let's reach out to each other AND to those who need what we have

Back to the question of what it is about our faith, our Unitarian Universalism, that creates growth?  
What do we offer to those who are out there and haven't found us?

[Read from "Where Do We Go from Here?" excerpts pp. 3-5.]

We began as individual trees. Our numbers have increased from 2's and 3's to 30's and 40's. We are sustained by our friends and we sustain our friends by working together for the future of our fellowship. We have lost a few along the way. And more have joined us. We are not a self-sustaining forest yet. But our path ahead is clear. If we continue our growth by reaching out to those who will be so happy to find us, bringing in more kindred spirits, sustaining and uplifting each other at the times when we each need sustaining, welcoming children in our midst, building the home-of-our-own where we can create a sustaining spiritual environment and have room for the activities of our fellowship and our community, and then calling a minister who can lead us. Then we shall be a forest, permanently rooted, established for the ages on the Northern Neck of Virginia as a bright beacon for our community and a sanctuary where we can be nourished in our spiritual journeys. Let us join together in this opportunity.