

Leaving Churches: Signs of Renewal amid Shifting Sands
Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching.
Sunday, June 23, 2024
UU Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #1024 When the Spirit Says Do, #123 Spirit of Life/Fuente de Amor, #1028 The Fire of Commitment. Special Music: Somewhere over the Rainbow (H. Arlen & E.Y. Harburg, arr. I.K. Kamakawiwo'ole), Evening Prayer (Humperdinck), Come Sunday (Ellington).

Personal Reflection by Worship Associate Celia Buckley (printed after the sermon)

Sermon by Roger Jones

What brings people to check out a congregation for the first time? And why do they choose to visit again? Each one of us probably has our own answers. What I have read about, and what I have heard, is a longing and a need for community. Not just any kind of community, not just any random way to spend some time around other people, but a place where you can be known and accepted as you are, where you are invited to consider meaning and purpose in your life, and where you find encouragement to live out your values and commitments. People visit looking for community.

In 21st century America, however, relatively few people make such a visit. A minority of this country—fewer than half—participate in a congregation of any kind. Contrary to popular impressions, this is not a new thing. Historian Molly Worthen says that rates of church attendance were never as good as the Christian Right wing likes to assert when attacking our secular culture. Before the Civil War, for example, “regular attendance probably never exceeded 30 percent,” Worthen says. Attendance rose to a high of 40 percent of the population around 1965 and fell “to under 30 percent in recent years.” This is the case even though 77 percent of people responding to Gallup surveys identify as Christians. In such polling, “69 percent of the people say they are ‘very’ or ‘moderately’ religious,” even though about half of those people don’t actually show up.

If it is true that most people don’t participate in religious communities, this means that every first visit to a congregation is a rare and special moment. For the visitor, it is an opening, an opportunity for connection, shared meaning, and belonging. For a congregation, it is an opportunity to live up to its values--if it values inclusion and belonging.

During my sabbatical last fall I visited a number of congregations in Sacramento and in other places. My observations caused me to think about the ways that attitudes in a congregation can undermine the pursuit of its mission. Unexamined habits can keep it from serving the needs of people whose curiosity has brought them to its doors. The congregations I visited were mainline, middle of the road Protestant Christian churches, though I did visit a number of UU congregations. When I went to visit one smaller UU church in another state, I wasn’t sure where the building’s main entrance was, and I was arriving to be the guest preacher! Moreover, I had to ask for a copy of the printed order of service three times before somebody found one. (I wanted to know when I had to do my parts of the service.)

My recent visits gave me some perspective on how we at USSS can do even better as we seek to build a community of belonging. Yet my first lessons in church hospitality go back 39 years ago.

At the age of 24, I finished graduate school and began a career in state government. I moved to Springfield, the capital city of Illinois. There I began a search for community which was also a spiritual exploration. Out of curiosity, I went to one service at a church of the liberal Protestant denomination in which I had grown up (and from which I had drifted away during college). On a Sunday morning, I showed up at a glorious gothic stone church with sunlight streaming in through the colors of stained-glass windows. As the organ prelude began to hum, I slipped into a pew near the back. An older white man and woman were in front of me. The woman turned, took a look at me, and smiled. “Good morning!” she said. “We’re glad you’re here... because we need more young people.” I don’t remember the sermon I heard, the music, or anything else except for that cry of desperation masquerading as hospitality.

As I continued my search for community in Springfield, it was the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship where I ended up making repeat visits and then joining. Yet this might not have happened at all. On a warm August morning, I approached the fellowship’s cinder block building for the first time. I was curious and nervous as I went up to the door and grasped the handle. It was locked! Then I saw a paper sign indicating that instead of a service, they were having a picnic in a local park. I felt too self-conscious to just show up at a picnic for my first time. Fortunately, I gave them a second chance and returned on another Sunday. This time, I did find people at the church. A number of them introduced themselves to me.

That fellowship wasn’t big; it had a half-time minister and a paid pianist, and volunteers did the rest. Yet it was a vital community for me. Living in that socially conservative small city, in my church I found supportive adults with whom I could be myself when I didn’t feel I could be myself at work. I found mentors for navigating the frustrations of my first career. Eventually, I was elected to their Board of Trustees, recruited to volunteer in Religious Education, and invited to be a worship associate, but not all at the same time. During the pledge drive, I was asked to make a financial commitment for the first time in my adult life.

After years of loneliness, I was making a place that felt like home. After three years there, I began considering a call to the ministry. As I think back on my perspective as a rare young-adult newcomer, I realize that none of the people in their 60s, 70s or beyond ever said to me, “We’re sorry we don’t have any members in your age group.” Instead, they showed an interest in getting to know me. They were curious where I had moved from, how I had found UUism, and what I thought of the service. Nobody said, “We need more people like you. Why don’t you bring some of your friends?” They just were *friendly* to me.

During my sabbatical last fall, I attended Sunday services at a variety of sizes and styles of congregations. One thing this reinforced for me is that it is easier for *larger* congregations to grow in a sustained way. With more staff and activities, there are more choices for involvement. With more financial and human resources, there’s more consistent quality in services and programs. I visited a few larger churches that can comfortably fill their seats or pews with worshippers at more than one service on a Sunday, and which have two or three ministers. While their theologies are different from what you encounter here at USS, we have many shared values. And on my visits, I saw many comparable programs which support the vitality of larger congregations. Like them, we at USS are blessed to be free of many of the concerns which burden smaller congregations in these times. Yet we can always enhance the ways that we live out our mission.

Several of the churches I visited can fill only a half or a third of their seats on a Sunday. Unfortunately, this is not because most of their people are participating by Zoom. One minister I know does two services every Sunday, driving a few miles between two churches in order to pull together a full-time income. This also enables two congregations to keep operating in their original buildings and neighborhoods. Yet sometimes this practice can keep a congregation from doing the hard work of discernment about their future. We heard in Celia's reflection an example of the courage and honesty involved in that work, as she described some of the history of the UU Community Church of Sacramento. Though it's not easy, the work of discernment can be as faithful to the mission and values of a congregation as any other activity it undertakes.

I attended a few services at one local church where a younger friend is the new pastor. They have not filled more than half of their pews for a few decades, but on my visits, they had enough people so that hymn singing felt satisfying to me. There was an inclusive spirit in the place, and there were other visitors in addition to me. It was a joy to experience my colleague's love for the congregation he now serves. However, after the welcome and announcements, they took time for people to greet one another. Apparently, this meant everybody greeting everybody. It seemed to go on forever. I'm not a shy person, but after I'd said hello to 12 people, I had to sit down and open my order of service, praying for the next hymn to start. Fortunately, at their coffee hour people were not so rushed in greeting visitors as they had been in saying hello to everyone in the service.

At another Protestant church in Sacramento, a friend and I arrived at a small sanctuary just a few minutes before the opening music. I find it can be distracting to sit in the back near the doors of a sanctuary, so I dragged him down to sit in the fourth pew from the front. To my right, a lady leaned over, smiled, and introduced herself. On the left another person walked up from the back and bent over to say hello. She told us her name and reached out with a hymnal in her hand. She said, "We'll be singing from this book today. Welcome!" This gentle hospitality impressed us. But then a lay leader stood at the podium to make some announcements. He clearly had been part of that place for years and assumed that everybody knew everybody else and wanted to hear him go on at length. He hadn't considered how things he said might appear to people who were not already comfortable in their church. Before he finished, he looked at us and said, "I see two gentlemen sitting up here who I don't think I have seen before." Uh oh. He smiled and said, "I hope you enjoy yourselves and come back." That church was otherwise an interesting place, and the sermon was decent. However, I decided that I would not go back there unless it's to do a training on how to welcome visitors, and how not to.

On another Sunday, my friend and I arrived 15 minutes early to a big old church with a sprawling campus. It too had seen more crowded Sundays earlier in its history. We came through the doors into the entry hall and entered the sanctuary. We didn't see anyone by the doors. Soon a solitary greeter caught up with us and gave us an order of service. They have two services there—one featuring a rock band and another, the one we were at, which has traditional music. After the service we tried to find the room where coffee hour would be happening. A few people wandered across a courtyard. I approached one of them and learned that they have coffee hour only between their two services. Oh well. It would have been helpful if that had been announced in the service or printed in their program, but I don't think it was. In our wanderings we encountered the minister, so I introduced myself to her. I gave thanks for her sermon but didn't mention that we'd been as lost as Hansel and Gretel trying to find our way around the place.

Here's another observation about a local congregation. After the sanctuary doors opened, people started wandering in and finding a seat in the quiet of the place. I noticed a number of people who were seated only three or four chairs away from their neighbors, yet they did not turn to say hello. I saw very few people introduce themselves to others. They just looked forward as if they were there all by themselves. Oh, wait! That's what I have observed right here, in our sanctuary at UUSS. If that's you, you know who you are. But perhaps you are part of the horde of people who rush in just as we are starting to sing the opening hymn.

It occurs to me that two things are as true in the smaller congregations I visited as well as the larger ones. The first point is that almost no congregation that was around in the 1960s has better attendance or more members now than it did then. The 1960s was a high point of participation in the history of mainline congregations, including here at UUSS. The second point is that no matter how small a congregation may have become, there are new people visiting every Sunday.

This was the case at every size of church that I visited, UU and otherwise. New people are always checking them out. It may be true that a majority of Americans are not longing for a spiritual community, not looking for a spiritual home. However, we don't have to try to convince a majority to have such a longing or to develop one. We need only provide a welcome to those people who do pursue their curiosity about a spiritual community. Their visit is a gift and an opportunity for us and for them.

You may think I am asking you to sign up to be a Greeter at UUSS. Well, sure, why not! Our Greeters team will always welcome new volunteers. They'll provide you with training and an orange name tag. But there is good news! You can be a greeter here even if you don't sign up to be an official one. Everyone can greet other people.

For the past few months, I have been inviting you, and asking you, to engage in a spiritual practice of self-introduction. That is, whenever you come to UUSS, introduce yourself to just one person you don't already know. This is a practice of hospitality. It is a gift of welcome that is free to give. You can even give this gift if you are a new person, merely by introducing yourself to one person you don't know each time that you are here. You can do this even on Zoom, if you hang around after the closing hymn and the benediction.

People visit a congregation with a longing for community. Some of us are prompted to visit by a sense that there could be something more in our week to week lives. We have a sense that there could be more inspiration to expand our hearts, more food for thought, more compassion, and more hope. The sense of something more has nudged us into showing up. Let us honor that holy nudge, in ourselves and in others. Whether you have been here for just one day, or a year or less, or for many years, you can honor this nudge. Let us honor the promptings of the spirit which bring us together to build community. So may it be, blessed be, and amen.

Personal Reflection by Celia Buckley

My wife Marion and I embraced Unitarian Universalism after we found the UU Community Church in Sacramento in late 1990. UGCC was renting space from other churches for evening services at 5. Given the number of families with young children, there was always a potluck supper after services. Every Sunday about 70 adults and a plethora of hungry children contributed to a nurturing, loving and sharing community. The church was growing, and UU

Community finally rented our own, unshared space and started holding services on Sunday mornings. Our small church ultimately reached 100 members.

For me, the Unitarian Universalism faith offered a healing balm to the pain I had felt from mainstream theological belief systems that promoted homophobia and heterosexist views. Becoming a member of UUCC connected me to a community I didn't know I yearned for. I loved learning about different faiths and spiritual paths. Through that understanding, I learned to be respectful and more accepting of other people's faith traditions. This positively impacted my professional nursing career devoted to children with congenital heart defects.

Unfortunately, the economic downturn of 2008 resulted in employment losses for many of our church members. Key financial supporters moved away. Our minister accepted a temporary reduction in her hours and pay. We decided to move out of our own building and rented upstairs space at the downtown Pioneer Congregational Church of Christ. We continued with financial struggles and never regained our previous vitality. 70, then 60, then 50 members couldn't sustain our full-service church with a professional minister, paid pianist, religious education program and UUA member dues. We anguished over our future. Many meetings were attended, and many tears were shed as we cut our minister to 50%. Finally, deep discernment began in 2013 on whether to close the church which had existed for nearly 24 years. My wife Marion was President of the Board as we determined what was next. Too few people were doing all the work and many of us felt exhausted as we desperately tried to hold on to our church home. After great anguish and more tears we decided UU Community Church would cease operations on July 1 of 2014 after 24 years. We donated hymnals, furniture, chalices, and fabrics back to this founding church of UU Society of Sacramento. Even this beautiful pulpit was lovingly built by UUCC member Kurt Schmidt and was donated to UUSS as we closed our doors.

How to let go of a dream? How to say goodbye? How to cope with this profound loss? It was so hard. Despite our heartbreak several of us showed up to UUSS that first Sunday in July after we closed. Unbeknownst to us, our first Sunday at UUSS was the LAST Sunday UUSS would be here due to a major renovation. Anticipating a construction project lasting over a year, UUSS had rented a neighboring Congregational Church while this building was transformed into a new sanctuary with a new welcome hall and kitchens.

For me, going to the newly rented Congregational church on the following Sunday was a healing transition. Although our circumstances were dramatically different, displaced former UUCC members joined the displaced current UUSS members under a new roof. We had a unique opportunity to create a new community where everyone was welcome and displaced! Together we grappled with change. Together, we shared some anxiety, some fear and some excitement. Yes, the loss of UU Community Church was profound. But a church community is so much more than a building. It is the human sharing of joys and sorrows and longings and hope for the future. That hope for a new future was a healing for my loss. UUSS did not let me down.