



2003 District Annual Meeting April 11-12, 2003 Stamford CT

Closing Remarks by Lynda Bluestein

Supporting & Encouraging Growth

The Rev. Scott Alexander in introduction of the book he edited on growth, *Salted With Fire*, believes two things are needed to grow a congregation: 1) a spiritual conviction to share our "saving gospel" and 2) the minister and lay leaders need to address the cultural norms that exist in the congregation that have been barriers to growth.

I would add to what Scott says by encouraging congregation boards to get the important questions out on the table and agree to an action plan. These are the same questions I learned long ago in Journalism -- Who – What – When – Where – Why and How. Who is going to take the lead on growth initiatives? What will they be? When do we start? Where will new members come from? Why are we doing this and How are we going to conduct our outreach to potential new members? Who is interesting. Who are potential new members for your congregations and where do they live? Are the "whos" you want as new members going to want to be part of your faith community?

Here are the "Growth Equations" from research being done on faith communities in the 21st century.

How People are Brought Into the Church

| | |
|--------------------------|-----|
| By advertisement | 2% |
| By the minister | 6% |
| By organized outreach | 6% |
| By friends and relatives | 86% |

Friendship Ratio -- 1:7

Each new member in a congregation should be able to identify at least seven friends in the church within the first six months.... If new members do not immediately develop meaningful friendships in their church, expect them to return to their old friendships--and ways-- outside the church.

Group Ratio – 7:100

There should be at least seven groups in a church for every 100 members. This ratio in a church will provide important answers to the question, "How open is this church to newcomers?"

New Group Ratio – 1:5

Of the groups that now exist in a church, one of every five should have been started in the past two years. The reason that new groups are important is that established groups usually reach a "saturation point" sometime between nine and eighteen months following their formation. The remedy- -new groups! New groups, new growth, and new people involved.

Staff Ratio – 1:150

A church should have one full-time staff member for every 150 persons in worship. This ratio is a good indicator of a church committed to growth. By contrast, a plateaued church will often have a staffing ratio that is actually inhibiting growth. If the ratio reaches 1:225-250, it is unusual to see any significant increase

in active membership. The second person a church should add to its staff should be a person ministering full-time in the area of the incorporation of new members into the fellowship.

Visitor Ratio – 3:10

Of the first-time visitors who live in the church's ministry area, three of every ten should be actively involved within a year. Visitors are the only source of church growth except for biological growth--children of members. If visitors do not feel genuinely welcome, needed, or wanted, they seldom return.

Vision to Success Ratio – 1:1

Vision is critical to success. It requires having a very imaginative, highly motivated and persuasive leadership group who develop the vision, announce it to the organization, enlist their support in pursuing it, and lead them toward achieving it.

People in Transition Are Looking for A Faith Community

Probably there is no time when an individual is more open to visit or join a religious community than at the particular period when he or she has left his friends and relatives at "home" is now in a completely new environment. Denominations multiply rapidly as they reach out to these 'displaced' persons.

There are some concrete steps that congregations can take after they make that commitment to grow. Here's my list:

- 1) **A clear vision/mission statement that includes a growth orientation.** Such a statement needs to be recent. I believe vision/mission statements should be redone or at least revisited every 5-6 years. These are not long drawn out everything including the kitchen sink type statements, but brief and clear in three or four sentences.
- 2) **Quality Sunday services with integrated well-done music, this also includes integrating children's stories and joys & concerns so they fit with the flow of the service.** It also means having lay leaders who participate committed to working with the minister on form and presentation. This is not amateur hour. If we are serious about attracting new people we need to understand that worship is often their first experience with us and it must be a quality experience.
- 3) **Structured follow-up with visitors and a clear path to membership.** This takes time but is the only proven way to bring in and keep new members. Advertising, name speakers, and other things we have tried in the past don't really do it. There needs to be a phone call from a lay person within 72 hours of a persons first visit, followed by other integrating steps like visitor brunches, UU classes at least three times a year, and invitations to special events. Then people need to be asked to join, invited to pledge and be offered an entrée into volunteer work.
- 4) **Commitment to supporting quality Lifespan RE, this includes paying professionals, even part-time folks at UU guidelines and supporting their joining LREDA and going through Renaissance Modules.** We recognize that Lifespan Religious Education is important but rarely do our budgets show that this is true. LRE needs to be part of the whole congregation's commitment.
- 5) **An understanding of church dynamics and organizational structure, this includes the work done by Alice Mann on transitions.** This is particularly important when a congregation is in transition, between ministries. Congregations need to understand that ministers have differing styles that fit differing size congregations and that they need to be clear on what size they want to be.
- 6) **Development of gifts based shared ministry and/or Lay Associates program and/or some sort of small group ministry.** This is part of integrating people into the congregation. At least one of these approaches needs to be part of growing congregation. Shared ministry has been a buzz word in many UU circles in the past few years, but congregations need to understand what this means. From my perspective it means we all have gifts we contribute to the ministry of the congregation. Lay leaders work

with ministers to develop these gifts. It does not mean we are all ministers, nor does it mean I do my thing while you do yours, it does mean working together for the vision and mission of the congregations. Small group ministry is an approach we are beginning to get better at in UU congregations. It recognizes that we commit to a congregation most when we have an opportunity to share through small groups. There are a number of ways of developing such programs but to be intentional about organizing small groups is important to a growing congregation.

7) A mission-based year round canvass structure is a must for a growing congregation. We have come to the conclusion that a mission based canvass works best on helping people understand how the finances support the mission of a congregation. Such an approach needs to be year round so that as we bring new people in they are brought on board with support of the congregation, it makes no sense to wait until the next yearly canvass to do ask new members for support.

8) A social justice/outreach project that involves as many people as possible in the congregation. This is not a response to a committee's plea to write letters or response to the issue of the day but an intentional program that involves the congregation through worship, RE, and participation in short term, well-defined projects.

I know that you are having many of these conversations about growth in your own congregations, and we on the district board are devoting the next years to supporting and encouraging growth. We have much work to do and I for one look forward to the challenges of growing this district.