

# The Church Stress Test

Adapted from Thomas Bandy for Unitarian Universalists. See the original at <http://dl.dropbox.com/u/33077576/Congregational%20Mission%20Assessment/Ministry%20Evaluation%20Tools/The%20Church%20Stress%20Test.pdf>

Just as stress can affect the human heart causing distress, so also change can affect our congregations causing distress. Think of this exercise as a kind of spiritual treadmill similar to the one a cardiologist might use to assess the strength of the human heart.

Listed below are 40 principles of church growth that are all true for the 21st century. However, these principles may be very different than the assumptions that church people had in past decades. Each statement is designed to challenge your thinking. Cumulatively, it is as if the “treadmill” gets faster and becomes more steeply inclined.

This is simply an exercise to guide your thinking and stimulate discussion in your congregation. You may wish simply to discuss the principles and their brief explanations. Better yet, ask each member of the group to score their reactions in the column provided, and then compare and discuss the spectrum of responses. And better yet, collate and average your group response for each of the 40 principles, and share them with the pastor or church board. They can compare results from similar groups and gain deeper insight into the challenges facing the church.

Measure your “heart rate” using a scale of 1 – 10. Record your personal reaction to each church growth principle in the column to the right. Average the responses in your group, and compare them to the responses of other groups for added discussion.

|   |          |          |          |          |          |          |          |          |  |
|---|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|--|
| <b>Pleasant<br/>Surprise<br/>Alarm!</b> |          |          |          |          |          |          |          |          |  |
| <b>1</b>                                | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>4</b> | <b>5</b> | <b>6</b> | <b>7</b> | <b>8</b> | <b>9</b> |  |
| <b>10</b>                               |          |          |          |          |          |          |          |          |  |

**Calm  
Understanding**

## Vision and Trust

**My Response**

- 1) **The youth are *NOT* the future of your church!** \_\_\_\_\_  
 Transformed adults (ages 18-40) are the future of your church. Adults who are changed, gifted, called, and equipped will take care of the kids.... and everything else!
  
- 2) **The practiced sermon and the carefully crafted strategic plan never build trust.** \_\_\_\_\_  
 The unrehearsed message and the spontaneous deed reveal the hidden heart of the church. Seekers care less about your ideals and plans than about your everyday behavior and sources of strength.
  
- 3) **You are not called to preserve a heritage!** \_\_\_\_\_  
 The mission and vision of the congregation is your purpose. If the past helps you grow Unitarian Universalists for the future, use it. If not, then discern what your new story should be.
  
- 4) **Church *insiders* are the least able to discern future mission!** \_\_\_\_\_  
 People on the fringe of church life are essential to discerning the future. The most faithful visions are most often revealed among those who have been marginalized.
  
- 5) **If you can say it all in words, you’ve missed the point!** \_\_\_\_\_  
 Motivating visions are always a "Song in the Heart". They are best shared without word, to get the blood of total strangers pounding.

## Leadership and Organization

### 6) Boards should never manage anything!

Boards should align the church to your mission, model spiritual life, mentor emerging leaders ... and delegate management to a trusted, gifted few.

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### 7) Task groups always burn out!

True teams are driven by passion, guide by calling, care for one another on the journey, and hold one another accountable for spiritual growth. They keep going.

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### 8) Never hire staff to do ministry!

Hire staff to discover, equip, align, and release volunteers to accomplish the mission that the Spirit of Life is eliciting from their growing hearts. Growing and empowering volunteers accelerates church growth.

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### 9) The best leaders make the most mistakes!

Great leaders learn from experimentation. Set the boundaries, point toward the mission, insist on continuous education, and turn them loose.

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### 10). The Beloved Community is not a democracy.

Spiritual leaders emerge from spiritual discipline, earnest seeking, and courageous sensitivity while developing their own faith ... not from nominations processes or elections. Authenticity is more important than either professional skill or certification.

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## Membership and Care Giving

### 11) Every dying church in North America is a friendly congregation!

Thriving, growing churches provide multiple opportunities for safe, healthy, profound intimacy. People want to go beyond the coffee urn to talk with mentors.

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### 12) Church membership is unimportant!

Participation in congregational life and mission is everything. Partnered, accountable spiritual growth and hands-on mission embedded in the Unitarian Universalist's lifestyle are more important than voting privileges, comfort zones, and pot luck suppers.

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### 13) Never worry about losing church members.

Always worry about the people you have never met, the strangers that never came back, the seekers who never found an answer, the lost who never found a relationship and the broken who never experienced healing.

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### 14) It is *not* the Minister's job to visit the hospitals and nursing homes!

It is the responsibility of the members of the congregation to care for one another. It is the Minister's job to train them, mentor them, assist them when necessary, and hold them accountable for doing it.

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### 15) Co-dependency is *not* a virtue!

Unitarian Universalists should expect each member to take responsibility for themselves and the personal mission for which they are gifted and called. People who are true to Unitarian Universalism are not "needy" people ... they are thankful people ready to care for people in need.

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## Worship and Spiritual Habits

### 16) Nobody cares about just talking about spirituality!

Everybody wants to be touched by the healing & transforming power of the Spirit. The public is desperate to be changed, different, and liberated from their hurts and addictions.

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**17) There is no such thing as “Good Worship”!**

Worship that works is the only spiritual standard. “Good” worship helps people experience the transforming power of the spirit – everything else is tactics.

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**18) Most people don't like organ music!**

Most people like contemporary music with strong melody and lots of rhythm. Percussion, guitar, creative instrumentations, and small group ensembles get people's attention.

**19) It doesn't matter what people know following the worship service!**

What matters most is how people feel following the worship service. People want to "feel alive" for worship, and be motivated to learn and serve through the week.

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**20) No faithful person is ever “too busy”.**

Humans will shape their lifestyles around a compelling mission. They do not try to accommodate a mission to their lifestyle. They readily change personal and family plans to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly into any unexpected situation.

## Education and Training

**21) Sunday school is no longer the cornerstone of Religious Education!**

Small groups are the basic units of Faith Formation. Cross-generational affinity groups, meeting during the week beyond the church building, encourage spiritual growth.

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**22) Covenant groups in the church building is next to useless!**

Covenant Groups outside of the church building, on-the-job or amid the mission field, bears fruit. Share your faith while observing the world and conversing with seekers.

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**23) Mere theology lacks integrity!**

Clear Theology is the key to integrity in today's world. All you need to know is your embodied experience with the Spirit that your community cannot live without.

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**24) Recruitment for church office is a detour on the journey of life!**

Excited pursuit of a call brings personal fulfillment. People would rather fulfill their destiny, than spend time implementing someone else's agenda.

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**25) Good intentions do not make good servants!**

Good servants always welcome and expect quality training. Deploying an untrained servant is worse than enduring a gap in ministry. Always provide basic training, regular accountability, and constant coaching in everything you do.

## Outreach and Hospitality

**26) Unitarian Universalism is a blip on the radar of today's seekers!**

The mission field today is right outside your back door. Today most people in North America are confused or ignorant about even the basics of Unitarian Universalism.

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**27) Actions no longer speak louder than words!**

You must share your faith motivation for every beneficial service. Evangelism and social action are two sides of the same coin.

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**28) Mission teams don't need to report to church boards!**

Mission teams must connect weekly with a worship experience. Today's entrepreneurial teams don't need to get permission, but do need to grow spiritually in worship.

**29) Strategic planning is over-rated!**

The anticipation of the unpredictable is the art of thriving church life. Spontaneity, flexibility, high trust, and planned stress management accomplishes more mission.

**30) The personal tastes of church members are irrelevant!**

Radical hospitality demands that members take themselves out of their personal comfort zones and enter the comfort zones of strangers.

## **Property and Technology**

**31) Denominational identity is wasted space on outdoor signs!**

The public wants to know how bold your vision is; how profound and available your spiritual leaders are; how relevant your worship service will be; and if the world is different because you exist.

**32) The narthex is always too small!**

The public expects a food court. It's got to be easily accessible from the sanctuary, opulent with multiple choices, with lots of incentive to linger and plenty of mentors to meet.

**33) Visible organ pipes discourage anyone under 45!**

People learn more from images, video clips, symbols, and talismans than through the spoken word. Whenever you have to choose between visible organ pipes and a projection screen, always choose the projection screen.

**34) Heritage property maintenance is no longer a measure of faithfulness!**

Faithfulness is measured by upgradeable technologies. Technology is the way people discover and interpret meaning in life ... upgrade and grow at the same time.

**35) Building for eternity makes your church obsolete!**

Marketability, portability, and flexibility make your church responsive to the mission field. The church building is just a tactic that is always adapted to impact the mission field.

## **Stewardship and Finance**

**36) Self-sacrifice is the wrong message!**

Self-Affirmation is the right message. People seeking self-worth give generously to express and celebrate their inner value.

**37) Raising money to “keep the doors open” eventually closes the doors!**

Always raise money to “open new doors”. People don't want to give to perpetuate a memory, but they will give generously to change the world.

**38) Finance Committees shouldn't talk about money!**

Finance committees talk about deploying servants. Property and money are resources to be used in the deployment of people for mission.

**39) Unified budgets artificially limit mission!**

Capital pools to seed creative ministries multiply missions. Empower teams take responsibility to raise, manage, and spend the money they need for mission.

**40) Debt freedom always leads to church decline!**

Sound debt management is the key to thriving church development. People will maximize their small investments, & service the debt, of motivating missions.

## Summary for Discussion

Average your group score in each of the following areas. Higher numbers indicate areas where you will find it most difficult to understand or implement change. Lower numbers indicate possible "entry points" to initiate Church Transformation.

|  | <b>Average</b>     |                    |
|--|--------------------|--------------------|
| <b>Group<br/>3</b>                                   | <b>Group<br/>1</b> | <b>Group<br/>2</b> |
| <b>Vision and Trust: Statements 1-5</b>              | _____              | _____              |
| <b>Leadership and Organization Statements 6-10</b>   | _____              | _____              |
| <b>Membership and Care Giving Statements 11-15</b>   | _____              | _____              |
| <b>Worship and Spiritual Habits Statements 16-20</b> | _____              | _____              |
| <b>Education and Training Statements 21-25</b>       | _____              | _____              |
| <b>Outreach and Hospitality Statements 26-30</b>     | _____              | _____              |
| <b>Property and Technology: Statements 31-35</b>     | _____              | _____              |
| <b>Stewardship and Finance Statements 36-40</b>      | _____              | _____              |

### Top Five *Most* Stressful Statements

Indicate by number or keyword the five highest scoring principles.

|          | <b>Group 1</b> | <b>Group 2</b> | <b>Group 3</b> |
|----------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| <b>1</b> |                |                |                |
| <b>2</b> |                |                |                |
| <b>3</b> |                |                |                |
| <b>4</b> |                |                |                |
| <b>5</b> |                |                |                |

### Top Five *Least* Stressful Statements

Indicate by number or keyword the five lowest scoring principles.

|          | <b>Group 1</b> | <b>Group 2</b> | <b>Group 3</b> |
|----------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| <b>1</b> |                |                |                |
| <b>2</b> |                |                |                |
| <b>3</b> |                |                |                |
| <b>4</b> |                |                |                |
| <b>5</b> |                |                |                |