

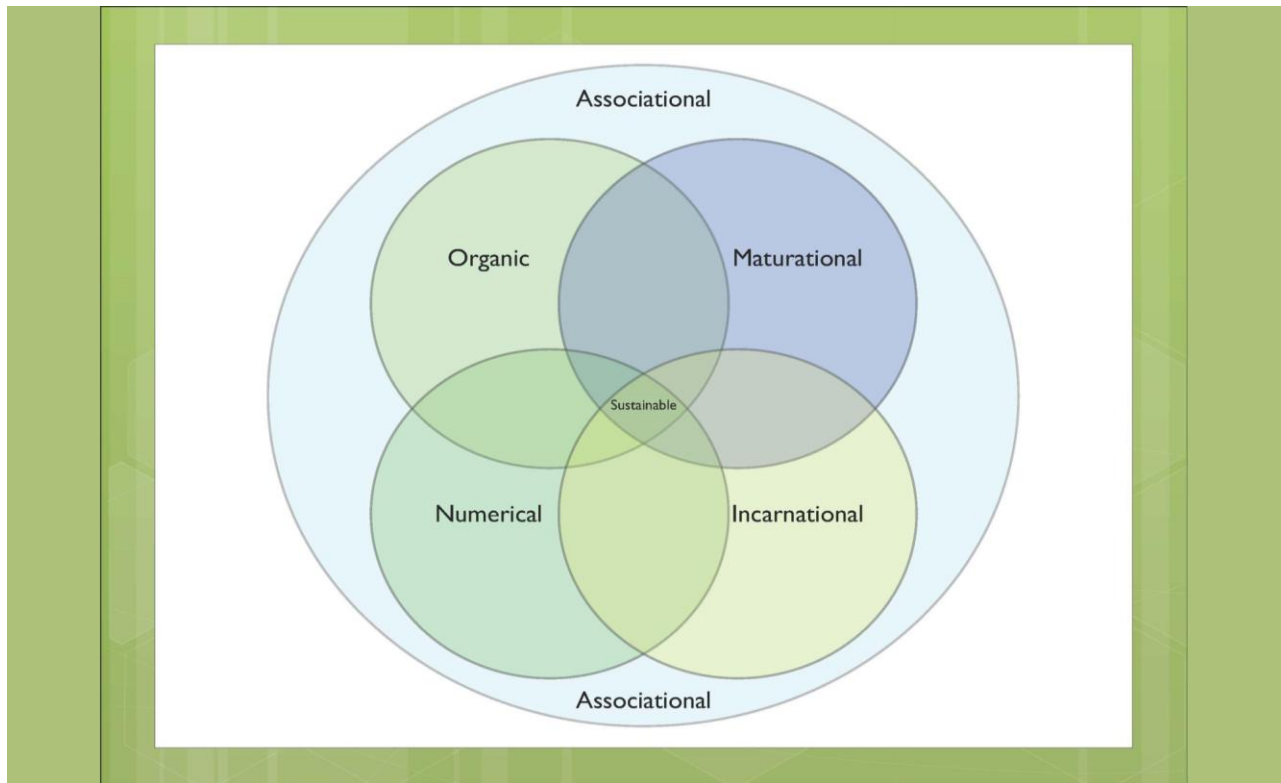
## Summary of Community Conversation on Growth

We began by considering the nature of growth and the ways in which a healthy congregation can grow. We did not narrow our focus to growth in numbers only, seeing that growth comes naturally from doing the "right" things and we first considered how to decide on the "right" things.

"Growth is inevitable in healthy congregations. To be a healthy congregation is to develop responses that are sound and reasonable. To be healthy is to be vigorous, to have strength, and to use these qualities in taking action. When a congregation sees clearly its place and possibilities and understands its mission and purpose, it will make decisions that serve itself and its community well. Such a congregation will continue growing because of its health. Such a congregation is ready to serve people who need Unitarian Universalism."

New Congregation and Growth Resources  
Unitarian Universalist Association 2005

We take this to define Sustainable Growth. We discussed the following diagram, also from UUA. The premise is that Sustainable Growth derives from a combination of types of growth.



Loren Mead, author of More Than Numbers: The Way Churches Grow, describes these four types of growth in congregations. This was developed in work with mostly traditional churches so it has been adapted by UUs for our use. Even so it will be necessary for some of us to redefine some of the words to better represent our current beliefs as we discussed in the Conversation on Worship I and II earlier this year.

The four types of growth, represented by the interior circles, overlap in various ways to form sustainable growth. The larger, external circle represents the growth of UnitarianUniversalism and our part in it.

**Maturation Aspect of Sustainable Growth (Wisdom)** is the ability of a congregation to challenge, support and encourage each one of its members to grow in the maturity of their faith, to deepen their spiritual roots, and to broaden their religious imagination. It is also the ability of the congregation as an institution to go deeper into the faith while maintaining the welcoming path for newcomers.

**Organic Aspect of Sustainable Growth (Strength)** is the task of building the community, fashioning the organizational structures, developing the practices and processes that result in the dependable, stable network of human relationships in which we can grow and from which we can make a difference. It is also the physical plant and the staff needed for the size of the congregation.

**Incarnational or Commissioned Aspect of Sustainable Growth (Action)** shows the embodiment of the congregation's collective faith, as evident in principle driven actions and programs of its members. Here the UU principles become informing ideas for activities with and outside the life of the congregation.

**Numerical Aspect of Sustainable Growth** is adding new members while maintaining the number of members already within the congregation. Keeping track of losses and understanding why they happen and changing things that need to be changed in order to retain healthy members. Never compromising ethics or principles and understanding that some losses are healthy or inevitable.

While all forms of growth are important, numerical growth is the type most focused on and the easiest to measure. We examined what the research tells us about people and churches.

There is a great deal of research on growth in churches. The largest studies covering the longest time periods are not specifically representative of UU congregations. They do, however, cover many types of religious organizations and the results are surprisingly consistent with UU studies.

We examined the conclusions from the largest and longest running survey of factors affecting growth that we found. The factors identified were individually correlated with numerical growth. The factors were not ranked as to overall importance. The list comprised all factors correlated more than 50% with growth. The positive growth factors selected from the study were:

- Clear mission and purpose
- Innovative worship
- Follow-up with visitors in several ways
- Members heavily involved in recruiting new members
- Adoption of new technologies
- Use of electric guitars in services
- Special events to attract people from the community
- Younger minister (less than 50 years old)

There are no real surprises in this list. While the correlation was with numerical growth a little thought will show how the other aspects of growth are involved in the factors. The use of electric guitars in services appears to reflect a growing trend in fundamental and also mainstream churches to bring in more contemporary music. While it doesn't seem to belong with the other more important factors it does speak to the importance of music and especially variety in music in the church life. The only factor that correlated negatively with growth which seemed worthy of discussion was that churches with ministers older than 50 years had negative growth. It was agreed that other characteristics, skills and experience of a minister would be far more important than chronological age for us.

We then briefly reviewed the current status of growth in UnitarianUniversalism. While mainline churches were struggling with growth in the two decades prior to 2012, UU churches were managing slight growth from year-to-year. However that in about 2010 and subsequent years have seen slight declines. In 2012 UUA experienced a decline in membership from 162,796 to 161,502 (0.79%).

More significant than the very slight loss is how the losses occurred. Essentially all of the growth occurred in the largest congregations. As a group, medium to small churches experienced declines. Considering gain or decline of < or > 3% as significant, it was discovered that about 28% of congregations had growth above 3%. About 34% had declines greater than 3% and the remainder muddled along around the breakeven point.

For a decade UUA has been identifying "Breakthrough Congregations" which have achieved outstanding sustainable numerical growth and asked them to share their experiences at GA. Many have short videos that are very informative and each has a write-up. These are on [www.uua.org/growth/breakthrough](http://www.uua.org/growth/breakthrough) should you wish to see them.

Shared strategies which showed up many times include:

- Culture of welcoming
- Integration of new members
- Emphasis on families
- Clear mission and commitment to it
- Sense of community and commitment
- Music
- Community outreach
- Excellent social media presentation.

Following the break we discussed what we consider to be the strengths of UUCT in considering growth and the challenges facing UUCT. The items are listed in the order in which they were proposed.

### **Strengths**

- Adaptability
- Organic environment
- Financial support
- History
- Leadership
- Message, mission
- RE program

Variety of activities  
Sense of community  
Campus  
Personality, energy  
Smarts  
Acceptance of others, diversity  
Welcoming Community

### **Challenges**

Lack of diversity, especially Hispanic  
Aging congregation  
Finance  
Need for more volunteers  
Limits of size, especially sanctuary  
Dismissive attitude to newcomers  
Location  
Insular  
Smarts  
Marketing, outreach, social media  
Lack of community presence  
Aging campus  
Small dome  
Suburban location for urban church  
Lack of commitment  
Aging dome: aging hippie

So now what do we do? Looking at our identified strengths and challenges it is clear we are conflicted about a number of things. Clearly there is a good deal of work to do before we can develop a consensus about growth. And there is the wildcard. The minister we select will have a major role in our future growth. If all goes well he/she will just be getting acquainted in the fall of 2015. Some decisions will need to be deferred at least until winter 2015 though we can and should continue our conversations so that we have all opinions, feelings and concerns about the changes we are envisioning in the open. It will take time to deal with all that in a manner consistent with our covenant.

We did not reach a consensus, nor did we try, but several facts emerged.

There were a number of different thoughts, feelings and concerns regarding growth in our small group of about 25 members. The members attending were largely active, long time members and it is unlikely that all the thoughts, feelings and concerns of others in the congregation were expressed. We need to broaden and deepen the discussion over the coming months.

When we think of growth we cannot think just of numbers.

Some members do not think growth in numbers is all that important but would be receptive to numerical growth that arose from improvements in the other types of growth.

Some members feel that growth in numbers is necessary to have the resources in money and time to achieve goals in improving our programs and facilities and to be certain we are not overly dependent on older members to continue to carry the load they currently do.

Some members have not made up their minds yet and don't feel they have enough information to form a strong opinion.

Deciding whether to grow and how to grow is complex. To be successful it is necessary to actively involve as many people as possible.