

## INSTITUTIONAL TRACTION

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Annual Meeting Sunday

21 May 2006

First Unitarian Church

Pittsburgh, PA

Here at the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh, we have a great many activities, events, gatherings, meetings, classes, concerts, and rehearsals. We have two worship services every Sunday, and now three services on Christmas Eve. We send out great quantities of email messages, newsletters, and pledge statements; we make many telephone calls; we have innumerable face-to-face conversations. But are we making progress as an institution? Are we getting stronger as an institution? In other words, how much institutional traction do we have?

Today we are holding our Annual Meeting, and therefore it is appropriate that we take a few moments to reflect on our progress as an institution. Of course, fulfilling our mission as a congregation is our primary task. Our mission statement says: “The mission of the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh is to nurture a caring and diverse community of all ages that provides a pace of worship, celebrating life and its stages. We support and encourage each other to grow intellectually and spiritually, without dogma, in our search for truth and meaning. We aspire to achieve our greatest potential as human beings by cultivating a critical appreciation of ethical principles, in order to foster a more just and compassionate world.”

Our mission statement does not say anything about institutional traction. One might claim, therefore, that we should not focus on growing stronger as an institution, since it is not in our mission statement. Yet I would argue that growing stronger as an institution is an essential strategy for fulfilling our mission even more effectively in the long run.

What does it mean to grow stronger as an institution? Does it mean growing in membership? Does it mean having a larger endowment? Does it mean having more trusting relationships among people here? Or does it mean having a more confident, “can-do” attitude among the leaders?

In his book More Than Numbers, Loren Mead identifies four ways that churches grow—four dimensions of what we mean by congregational growth. The four different types of growth include first, numerical growth; second, growth in spiritual maturity; third, growth in organizational effectiveness; and fourth, growth in the ability of a congregation to put its principles into practice in the larger community. This morning, I

would like to reflect on each of these dimensions of church growth as they apply to what we are doing here at First Unitarian Church.

Numerical Growth. The first dimension of growth is numerical growth. This refers to the number of activities, attendance on Sunday mornings, the size of the budget, and the number of active members. You can take a look at our Annual Report for the 2005—2006 church year and clearly see that we have a wide variety of activities and events. It is really quite remarkable to read this report and realize just how much happens here.

I have included statistics for Sunday morning attendance in my portion of the church's Annual Report for the 2005—2006 church year. Unfortunately, we had complete statistics for only twenty-four out of fifty-two Sundays. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that on sixteen of those twenty-four Sundays, the total number of people in our building was greater than three hundred. Moreover, on three Sundays the total number of people in our building was greater than three hundred and fifty. For our denomination, having three hundred and fifty people in the building on Sunday morning on a regular basis indicates that a congregation falls into the "large" category. We have not yet achieved that distinction. But we are coming close.

Our budget has been steadily increasing over the past few years, and I am delighted to say that for the first time in recent memory, our pledge total has matched our goal. We have our Canvass Committee to thank for their dedicated effort and for their encouragement. Moreover, with the leadership of our Board of Trustees, we amended our By-laws to make it possible to tap our General Endowment in a more sensible and helpful way.

Since 2002, when we instituted several major changes, including our 9:30 worship service, our 9:30 religious education program, our Campus Ministry program, and our expanded music program, our membership has been steadily increasing, although last year we did experience a modest drop in membership.

I did a quick research project with figures provided by the most recent edition of the denominational directory published by the Unitarian Universalist Association. We have about one thousand and fifty Unitarian Universalist congregations. When ranked according to voting membership, the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh is number fifty-seven: that is, of the one thousand and fifty congregations in the Unitarian Universalist Association, fifty-six are larger than we are, and about one thousand are smaller. But when ranked according to budget, the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh is number ninety. I then narrowed my focus to our peer group, those congregations with a voting membership between four hundred and five hundred. Of the twenty-five congregations in this range, six are larger than we are in membership, but fifteen are larger in budget. One can look at this in two ways: on the one hand, we are doing more with less, serving a relatively larger number of people with a relatively smaller budget, which implies a relatively high degree of efficiency; on the other hand, we need not apologize for aspiring toward a larger budget, for despite our many resources, we are far from extravagant.

I have some additional brief observations about numerical growth: we had approximately eighty-five people at our Spring Retreat a couple of weekends ago; we had sixteen young people in our Coming-of-Age program; the Forum has reinvigorated itself; our Campus Ministry program included a retreat which was attended by a dozen of our

students; we created a new Endowment for Ministry with Children and Youth with two gifts of ten thousand dollars each; we added a third Christmas Eve service and had a combined total attendance of 576 for the evening; and we have just recently added a paid part-time Folk Orchestra Conductor to our program staff. With regard to numerical growth, we are doing many things right, and I would add that some of the things we are doing right are also rather innovative and imaginative. Our numerical growth may not be spectacular, but it is solid and substantial. At the same time, we could be doing even better, both with regard to increasing our financial resources and finding more effective ways to welcome and include those who are new to our religious community.

Maturational Growth. The second dimension of growth is growth in spiritual maturity. Loren Mead calls this maturational growth. This dimension of growth refers to growth in the stature and maturity of each member, growth in faith, and growth in the ability to nurture and be nurtured. It seems to me that growth in spiritual maturity is reflected in the quality of relationships within a religious community. Further, it seems to me that the quality of relationships within a religious community is reflected in the importance that a religious community places on small groups. Here at the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh, we are continuing to discover the value of small groups. We have three types of small groups: affinity groups, music performance groups, and covenant groups. Not every group functions perfectly; nevertheless, these groups provide wonderful opportunities for significant personal connections. People look out for one another in these groups. I am currently in the midst of reorganizing our lay pastoral care program, and the plan I have put together recognizes that a great deal of caring and sharing among lay people takes place in our small groups.

One very significant example of growth in spiritual maturity has been the emergence of an addictions ministry program here at First Unitarian Church. This addictions ministry program is one specific way that we are deepening and extending our sense of caring for one another, and thus it is one specific way that we are growing in spiritual maturity as a congregation.

Organic Growth. The third dimension of growth is growth in organizational effectiveness. Loren Mead calls this organic growth. This refers to growth of the congregation as a functioning community, able to maintain itself as a living organism, able to maintain itself as an institution that can engage the other institutions of society. One year ago, our Board of Trustees daringly instituted a new system of governance within this religious community, a system called policy governance, which places more of the day-to-day managerial responsibility on the staff and leaves to Board free to focus on setting policy and leading the congregation through a process of visionary planning. Our first year of policy governance has been largely successful, although all of us in leadership roles are still adjusting to the new system. For example, I am learning that if I am to take up additional responsibility for day-to-day management, I will have to be more focused with regard to my program responsibilities. Nevertheless, we have found that short-term planning is easier: decisions regarding the creation of the Folk Orchestra Conductor position, the new telephone system, the bell tower lock, and the video projector system for the Schweitzer Room (to name several examples) have been simpler and quicker.

Our Board of Trustees placed a solid foundation for future long-term projects by inviting Rev. Tricia Hart to serve as our Planning and Capital Campaign Consultant. She worked with us in September and again in February. Her most recent report recommends a rather involved series of focus group meetings in four different areas of church life. While this planning process may sound daunting at first, in my opinion it is wise, even essential, for us to engage in this process with sincerity and enthusiasm. We may or may not decide to replace our classroom building with a larger structure as a result of our deliberations, but we still need to plan our future together in a systematic way.

Incarnational Growth. The fourth dimension of growth is growth in the ability of a congregation to put its principles into practice in the larger community. Loren Mead calls this incarnational growth. This refers to growth in the ability to take the meanings and values of the congregation and make them real in the world and society outside the congregation.

In this dimension our church has taken some important steps this year toward becoming what Victoria Cole calls a “presenting organization.” We hosted over two hundred people for the Unitarian Universalist Revival last fall, an event which included two catered meals, presentations and workshops, a hymn sing, and a revival-style worship service. We also hosted a screening of a video entitled “Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Prices,” an event which brought over three hundred people from the larger community into our sanctuary, most of them non-Unitarian Universalists. With regard to the performing arts, we are continuing our partnership with Calliope to sponsor a series of folk music concerts, we are continuing to rent space to the Pittsburgh Music Academy, and we welcomed a summer camp organized by UMOJA, the African Arts organization, which involved a partnership between UMOJA, First Unitarian Church, the Wilksburg Family Center, and the Pittsburgh Refugee Center. Moreover, I am delighted to announce that on Sunday, November 5, 2006, First Unitarian Church will be presenting a concert of music by Mozart, including a piano concerto and a major choral work, with an orchestra of about twenty musicians, to be conducted by Robert Page, recently retired conductor of the Mendelssohn Choir.

In addition to presenting events at our church, we are also maintaining a modest presence in the larger community. We continue our membership with the East End Cooperative Ministry and the Pittsburgh Interfaith Impact Network, our choir performed with the Edgewood Symphony in December and sang for the Martin Luther King Celebration in January, Interweave participated in a Spiritual Day Out event last fall, our Social Justice Committee helped organize the presentation by Michael Lerner, and our Social Justice Endowment Committee has finally found its calling and has engaged in universal health care advocacy, including a public meeting this afternoon, which has prompted us to include church-related community events on our church calendar. Members of First Unitarian Church have also invited us to contribute financially toward social justice efforts including the Alternative Gift Market, the Khasi Hills School Sponsorship, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, the Mitten Tree, the Food Pantry, and the Mathilda Theiss Center. Moreover, our Board of Trustees is putting together a committee to explore the possibility of having First Unitarian Church become a Green Sanctuary, that is, become certified as an environmentally-friendly congregation.

There is much more that we could do to put our principles into action, and I trust that we will continue to find more ways to do so.

To-Do List, Wish List, Vision List. On all four of the church growth dimensions identified by Loren Mead, First Unitarian Church has some institutional traction. In some areas we are making wonderful progress, while in other areas we have many opportunities for doing better. Recently I heard someone define accountability in a new way. This person spoke of accountability not with regard to mistakes and shortcomings, but rather with regard to capabilities and possibilities. This morning, therefore, I would like to hold this religious community accountable for more fully achieving our potential, for more fully harnessing our capabilities and more fully developing the possibilities open to us. A comprehensive planning process would produce a nicely prioritized and representative list, but I would like to share with you just a few ideas for how we might grow as an institution. These things are on my wish list, or vision list, for First Unitarian Church: I envision us with a membership of six hundred adults and two hundred children and youth. I envision all of us becoming more skilled at welcoming newcomers and new members. I envision us inaugurating a concert series, drawing from our experience with Shadyside Concerts in the 1980s and 1990s. I envision us instituting a new lay pastoral care program, drawing from our experience with the Parish Visitors. I envision us creating a Planned Giving Committee. I envision us doing more effective programming for young adults, including regular Soulful Sundown events. I envision us purchasing and enjoying the new multicultural hymnbook supplement, Singing the Journey. I envision us purchasing a drum set for the Sanctuary. I envision us having video projection capability here in the Sanctuary. I envision us casting a larger net for a Campus Ministry fundraising campaign. I envision the great majority of the members and friends of this congregation as members of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. I envision us making a deeper commitment to doing better anti-racism work. I envision us becoming more skilled at securing short-term grants for various projects. I envision the great majority of the members and friends of this congregation as members of a small group, whether a covenant group, an affinity group, or a music performance group. I envision us aspiring to additional financial resources and a larger budget. I envision us making more substantial connections with other Unitarian Universalist people and organizations, both near and far, whether through Summer Institute, or through our own Pittsburgh Cluster, or by inviting Unitarian Universalist guests to our pulpit more often, or through leadership opportunities. Finally, I envision us growing our social justice ministry, expanding our presence and sharing our message of justice, peace, hope, and compassion with a larger number of people.

You may have your own ideas for how we can increase our institutional traction. Let us find ways to agree on workable priorities and then get on with the task of turning our vision into reality, building on what we have already achieved as we respond in creative ways to the invitation extended to us by the best future we can imagine.