

Environmental Analysis

UUPP!

J Bidwell / December 28, 2013

Overview

This is a greater environmental assessment of Unitarian Universalism (UU) in the United States (US) as well as western Massachusetts regional trends, and what they likely mean for our congregation. The analysis focuses on congregation numbers, theological values, and audiences.

The purpose of this report is to offer insights that may help in formulating the strategic plan; it is not making recommendations at this time.

1.0 We must assume our congregation will continue to shrink, without intervention

Our region's shrinking population coupled with stagnant to shrinking UU growth in the county, and especially in the state, means we must assume that our congregation will diminish over the next generation, unless we proactively intervene.

1.1 The USNF population base is shrinking

Source: <http://www.gazettenet.com/home/9661689-95/chart-the-shrinking-valley-projected-population-drop-by-2030-a-concern-for-officials>

The lower Pioneer Valley, including Hampshire county will lose 4.6 percent of its population by 2030 according to the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute—making it the only area of the state to lose people as the rest will grow by 3.2 percent. We have a relative lack of young families in particular. Fewer people in the area mean fewer people to pay for services, so taxes are likely to increase, meaning fewer dollars for other spending (i.e., church support).

1.2 Unitarian Universalist (UU) membership is shrinking in Massachusetts

Source: <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/183484.shtml>

In the decade 2001 – 2011, UU membership in the state shrank by 1,864 to a total of 19,246. Although Massachusetts still represents the largest number of UUs in the States, it has also been the largest loser of congregants in terms of numbers and percentages. This reflects an 8.8% decrease over the decade. It also reflects the impact of the economy in this region. (<http://www.uuworld.org/news/articles/285323.shtml>)

1.3 US UU membership is down

Source: *Annual Reports of membership*

- 2009-2012: certified members dropped from 164,505 to 162,796
- 2011-2012: average Sunday attendance fell
- 2008-2012: religious program registration fell, 2.1 percent in last year alone
- UU decline is far less than for evangelical churches. I.e., most churches are seeing a decline, and ours is less severe than others. (<http://uuworld.org/news/articles/183612.shtml>)

2.0 US UU shrinking membership numbers don't reflect the apparent growing interest in values associated with the UU

Source: <http://uuworld.org/news/articles/183612.shtml>

UU “identification” numbers overall have followed US population growth (Source: http://www.uua.org/documents/trinitycollege/uus_1998-2008_rpt.pdf) American Religious Identification Surveys estimates that the Unitarian-Universalist identifying (UUA) adult population was 463,000 in 1990 and 586,000 in 2008. This represents an increase of 123,000 adherents or 27%. This growth is similar to the total U.S. population growth of 30% over this time period.

The difference between “identified” UUs and “member” UUs has been hotly discussed (i.e., <http://www.philocrites.com/archives/003902.html>), but many feel that it means UU values seem to resonate with a growing number of people, even if that is not reflected in our membership numbers.

“The numbers raise the urgency that we just ought not do business as usual,” said Rev. Harlan Limpert, vice president of Ministries and Congregational Support. “Small year-to-year changes (in membership) are not that significant, because we are such a small faith. But what troubles me is the ten-year trend.” More strongly tapping into these values may provide opportunities for individuals looking for such a spiritual home, as well as providing us with an opportunity to grow, if we want. As the Rev. Peter Morales, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association said, “The culture is moving our way theologically, but not institutionally. We need to remind ourselves that we are capable of doing this—creative enough, clearly smart enough, and committed enough that we’re not afraid to move this into the future.”

3.0 Most of the USNF congregants will remain an aging population of well-educated liberals whites. Younger congregants can be attracted, but it will take planning and proactive outreach. There are growing opportunities with minorities that require outreach.

3.1 Traditional: Affluent Well-Educated Independent Liberal Whites

Source: http://www.uua.org/documents/trinitycollege/uus_1998-2008_rpt.pdf

Although the population in Hampshire County will shrink over the next generation, the majority of the population will remain our traditional congregational base: independent white liberals. In addition, our region has a higher number of affluent and well-educated people, which also constitute UU traditional congregants.

Education: Compared to the U.S. general population, the UUA population is highly educated. What is especially noteworthy is the high proportion of UUA adherents with post-graduate qualifications that is three times the national percentage.

Economics: The household income distribution of the UUA population reflects their high level of educational attainment. In 1990 65% of UUA households earned over \$25,000 compared to 50% of U.S. households. In 2008 54% of UUA households and 42% of U.S. households earned over \$50,000. The general affluence of the UUA population is also evident in a high level of home ownership: 78% in 1990 and 81% in 2008. It also diverged from the national pattern by having fewer students and unemployed persons in 2008.

Politics: As might be expected given their educational and economic profile, UUA adherents are more likely to register to vote than other Americans. 90% reported being registered compared to the national average of 76% in 2008. UUA adherents are much more likely to identify as Democrats than the general U.S. population. In 1990, 42% of UUA adherents and 35% of Americans identified with the Democratic Party. In 2008 UUA adherents were almost twice as likely as the U.S. population to prefer the Democratic Party (64% to 33%, respectively). Moreover, whereas in 1990 the ratio of Democrats-to- Republicans among UUA adherents was 2:1, by 2008 this ratio increased to 11:1. Though the UUA's partisan split is more skewed than among the U.S. population, they have similar proportions of self-proclaimed independents.

Religious-Secular Outlook: Unitarians are less religious and by far more secular in their outlook compared with the general American population. Nationally, 37% of American adults regard themselves as "religious" and 38% as "somewhat religious," namely 75% of the adult population. This is in contrast with only 37% of religious outlook Unitarians. Furthermore, the ARIS sub-sample indicates that 39% of Unitarian regard themselves as "secular" and 19% as "somewhat secular" in outlook whereas only 10% of adult Americans describe their outlook as "secular" and 6% as "somewhat secular." Interestingly, the finding that the UUA pattern (58% secular) also somewhat resembles that of America's Jews (i.e. persons who identify as Jewish-by- religion). Among these "religious" Jews, 44% describe their outlook as "secular" or "somewhat secular."

Belief in God: It underscores, yet again, that UUA self-identifiers are quite different in their religious worldview from other believers particularly the Christian majority and that they tend to be more skeptical. However, these findings also suggest that they are a heterogeneous group and tend to differ quite a bit among themselves on the fundamentals of religious faith.

3.2 Younger congregants

There are countless discussions on why younger congregants are leaving churches in general (simply Google "young people and church"), a trend that has been going on for years and is most commonly attributed to churches being perceived as too "political, too exclusive, old-fashioned, unconcerned with social justice and hostile to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people." (<http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/07/27/why-millennials-are-leaving-the-church/>) This seems to be reflected in the fact that established churches are the ones most declining (<http://www.churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/139575-7-startling-facts-an-up-close-look-at-church-attendance-in-america.html?p=4>).

This is supported by studies (<https://www.barna.org/barna-update/millennials/635-5-reasons-millennials-stay-connected-to-church#.UsBBYSi818s>), but isn't the whole story. After all, one could assume that younger congregants would be flocking to UU considering our values and what they supposedly want. Although there are fewer studies, anecdotal evidence indicates that all people, especially younger ones, simply have more opportunities to connect and socialize (<http://unitedmethodistreporter.com/2013/11/12/millennial-myths-real-reasons-people-leave-church/>).

Attempts to connect with younger congregants takes planning and time. This includes fostering, mentoring, and providing opportunities for younger people in leadership positions, as the Unitarian Universalist Society of Greater Springfield (<http://www.uusgs.org>) has done. The UU “Leap of Faith” program is a pilot program that helps successful congregations provide mentoring to congregations who want to grow.

(<http://uuworld.org/news/articles/183612.shtml>)

3.3 Elderly

Source: http://www.uua.org/documents/trinitycollege/uus_1998-2008_rpt.pdf

UUs are getting older. The median age of U.S. adults in 1990 was 40 years and it increased to 44 years in 2008, showing a pattern of aging among the general U.S. population. The median age of the UUA shows that it is aging at a faster pace. In 1990 the median age of UUA adherents was 44 years. By 2008 the AAU median age increased to 52 years, 8 years older than the median U.S. adult in the same year.

This trend mirrors the local demographic trend (FutureWorks Fall 2013 study for the Hampshire County Chamber) showing an aging population.

3.4 Hispanic & Latinos

Source: http://www.uua.org/documents/trinitycollege/uus_1998-2008_rpt.pdf

The UUA population has followed the national trend and become more racially diverse. Between 1990 and 2008 the share of Non-Hispanic whites among UUA adherents decreased from 90% to 75%, largely in part to an increase in its Hispanic population (compared to the national population the UUA is under-represented among the black, Asian and Other race groups).

A fall 2013 study by FutureWorks for the Hampshire County Chamber shows that ethnic/racial minorities account for all the County’s population growth—upwards to 35 percent versus negative growth for whites. Discrepancy between these cohorts go beyond growth. Hampshire County is highly educated and has high per capita income – but there is considerable variation by ethnicity. Education and earning discrepancy between ethnicities: i.e., Latino or Hispanics are least educated, and have the smallest incomes.

This opportunity is not unique to our region, and has not been lost on UUA leadership. Says Rev. Peter Morales, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association (<http://uuworld.org/news/articles/183612.shtml>), “(There) is a growing number of meetings and connections that support multicultural ministers and congregations. We now have at least 26 ministers of color serving congregations,” said Morales, “and we’re starting to see the transformational impact that is having in those congregations. We are learning to cross boundaries of class and culture.”