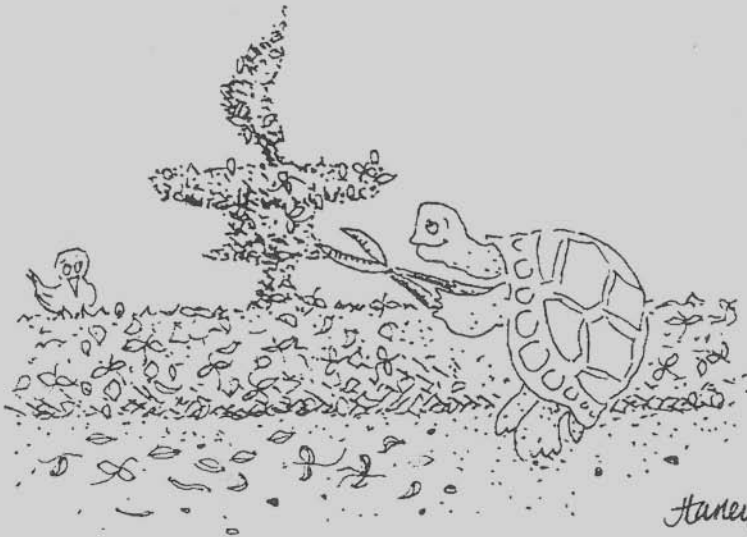


**THE  
GROWING  
EDGE**

**32 ideas and discussion prompts  
for  
Unitarian congregations**

**JOHN MIDGLEY**



**with cartoons by *John Harley***

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Cartoons © John Harley

## THE GROWING EDGE

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Look well to the growing edge. All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born; all around us life is dying and new life is being born. The fruit ripens on the tree, the roots are silently at work in the darkness of the earth against a time when there shall be new lives, fresh blossoms, green fruit. Such is the growing edge! It is the extra breath from the exhausted lung, the one more thing to try when all else has failed, the upward reach of life when weariness closes in on all endeavour. This is the basis of hope in moments of despair, the incentive to carry on when times are out of joint and folk have lost their reason, the source of confidence when worlds crash and dreams whiten into ash. The birth of the child - life's most dramatic answer to death - this is the growing edge incarnate. Look well to the growing edge!

**Howard Thurman**

My heart is moved by all I cannot save  
so much has been destroyed.  
I cast my lot with those who age after age,  
perversely, with no extraordinary power,  
reconstitute the world.

**Adrienne Rich**

Many people today believe that cynicism requires courage. Actually, cynicism is the height of cowardice. It is innocence and open-heartedness that requires the true courage - however often we are hurt as a result of it.

**Erica Jong**

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## Foreword

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**IN 1989 THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY** of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches (GA) appointed its first Development Officer. This decision was initiated by the Unitarian Development Commission, a team of Unitarian ministers and layfolk who came together in the late 1980s to address the fact that our congregations, and the movement generally, were continuing to suffer decline. For some years there had been awareness of a malaise, which consisted of continued decline in the strength and number of congregations, decline in the number of ministers recruited and trained, and also what appeared to be a passive, sometimes cynical acceptance that this was the way of the world.

Unitarians had, however, begun to hear talk of something called *development*. It was a concept that had been explored and tried in our congregations in the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) in the United States and Canada, with exciting results.

The decision was made to face up to the fact of our decline, to seek ways of reversing it, to explore *development* and to turn the denomination around from decline to growth. Funding for this endeavour came first from enthusiastic supporters, individuals and groups, notably *Foy Society* and some others.

Members of the Development Commission began to meet and talk, to share ideas and seek a mutually agreed way forward. Some of them visited the UUA and learned a great deal about development and of the processes and programmes that had worked there. They decided upon the word *development* as against *extension* and launched a scheme, that of specially selected and placed development ministers. This scheme was short-lived but encouraging. Much was learned.

Also, the then Director of Extension in the UUA, Rev. Bill Holway, visited the UK and led a conference on development for ministers at Great Hucklow. The ideas and the excitement began to spread.

Recognising the enormous scope of the work and the range of ideas involved, the Development Commission's next move was to appoint a Development Officer, someone to work full-time on the ideas and processes that constitute developmental activity. GA funding was sought and obtained.

\*

This Development Officer post came at a time when I felt ready for a career move, and I took it on with a mixture of apprehension and excitement. My qualifications for the post were: degrees in theology, 22 years of full time ministry, some twenty years of teaching at Unitarian College, undertaking and then leading training seminars in counselling at Unitarian College and elsewhere and a master of education degree in adult education and community development.

I too went off to the UUA and learned a great deal. I believe that our movement is enormously indebted to the UUA for sharing their ideas and resources so generously.

After six years (1989-95) the Development Officer appointment came to an end. I then decided that I would risk putting into writing some of what had been learned and tried during this period. I am very conscious that these essays constitute only a very small contribution to an enormous world of thought and experience that we call development.

If Unitarians find these writings helpful and stimulating towards their own endeavours for development, I shall, in a small way, have repaid the debt of gratitude I owe to those who dreamed of having a Development Officer, campaigned for the appointment, gave money

towards it, selected me for the post and gave me their support. I am also grateful to all the ministers, students at the Colleges, fellow officers of the GA and members of our congregations who participated in countless discussions and exercises, talking, trying and testing out the developmental thinking that I endeavoured to share.

I enjoyed all the learning and sharing. I developed as a person. I believe that much was achieved. It was a small but significant start towards the renewal of our denomination. I hope it turns out to have been the start of something big.

My thanks are due to my wife and colleague Celia, for her consistent and generous support and encouragement, and to Matthew Smith and Peter Bixby for help with preparation of the text and diagrams.

This collection of essays is dedicated to the memory of Rod Stewart, District Executive of the Pacific North West District of the UUA. His sudden and untimely death was a blow that still reverberates. Memories of the time we worked together continue to nourish.

(Rev) John Midgley  
GA DEVELOPMENT OFFICER  
1989-1995



## Introduction

---

**THE PURPOSE OF THIS COLLECTION** of essays is to share with my fellow Unitarians some of the amazing array of ideas known as development, in particular congregational development. I have found this area of knowledge so significant, satisfying and helpful that I am almost disposed to use the word development with a capital *D*.

As Development Officer I resolved to make our congregations my priority. I visited over eighty of them, many of them several times, and never regretted one visit. I am persuaded that the most satisfactory development and growth of our movement will come from the congregations, first inwards, then upwards or outwards. Though I dislike the term *grassroots*, it is the appropriate one. The heart of our denomination, in my view, is the work and worship of people in congregations. We are an Assembly of congregations. For most people, their main and most frequent Unitarian religious experience is as part of a worshipping congregation. From there will arise those who may also become active in our District Associations (DAs) and our national body the GA, as well as our international contacts.

Let me make this clear. I value greatly the work of our district and national groupings, and have something to say about how they work and what they offer. My point is simply that if we are to begin *somewhere* to revitalise our movement, the congregations, their leaders and members, are our significant starting point. I made this point over and over again to members of congregations. 'It will not help to look out to someone or something to come in and miraculously transform you and your church. If this congregation is

going to develop and grow, that development will have its beginning and being right here, in the hearts and minds of you folk, already present in this congregation.'

These writings are an attempt to put into readable form some of the ideas and processes that the Development Commission has been promoting, and which I have been attempting to implement during my period as Development Officer. There is a strong sense in which all books are anthologies. Consciously and unconsciously ideas are borrowed or absorbed from other people, and I readily acknowledge the many writers, thinkers and speakers who have influenced me. I have read much about development in congregations, and added to it books on voluntary organisations and, to my own amazement, those on leadership and management theory from the business world. If there is anything unique in this collection of essays, it is not the ideas but the way they have been put together, in my attempt to make them relevant to Unitarian congregations.

There is a widely held view that Unitarian congregations are unlike any other organisation, with their strong affirmation of our individuality. Inevitably (and, it is claimed, quite rightly) we are resistant to outsiders' ideas, especially the 'wicked' world of business and management, or anything North American, because, it is felt, they simply don't apply to the unique and precious grouping that we are. I have come to regard those views as unwarranted special pleading, a way of trying to avoid taking a fresh look at ourselves. Many of our congregations are in poor shape. We need to be willing to learn from anyone who can help us improve things.

My hope is that there will be people who will not only find these essays helpful to read, but also find they can use them for discussion or dialogue in their congregations. I have included along the way some questions for thinking and talking about. If these essays provide

Unitarians with something to stimulate the talk that leads to dreaming that leads to activities that enrich congregations and make them satisfying, stimulating, challenging, growing, *developing* and enjoyable places to belong to, then the purpose will have been achieved.

Sam says...

*Think things through. There is nothing so practical as a good theory.*

## A FEW PRELIMINARIES

---

**I WANT TO COME CLEAN** on a few starting points. I have my interests, my enthusiasms and prejudices and it might help if I state some of them.

1. I am still learning what the word *development* means. It conveys different things to different people.
2. I have never had a recipe for development.
3. I am basically very optimistic, tempered with a liking for Murphy's Law. In its classic form, this has three statements:
  - Nothing is as easy as it looks.
  - Everything takes longer than you think.
  - If anything can go wrong, it will.

It has become a cliché to add, 'and Murphy was an optimist!' Not so. The law as it stands is a touch cynical, which I don't like, but it has a sort of down-to-earth appeal for patience with people, which I do like.

It is also true that sometimes things go right, very right. There is a generosity and an impulse to be co-operative that sometimes delights more than words can say. It can be an act of grace.

4. Essential to development work is a healthy sense of humour. I have, however, a strong suspicion and dislike of *cynical* humour. It usually tries to conceal some defensiveness.

5. I am not sure if *develop* can really be used as a transitive verb in the context of working with people. The idea that I can develop you or your congregation does not feel comfortable with me. It suggests that I, or someone else, may do something to you, at the end of which it may be said that you have been developed. Not only do I doubt that this is possible, I seriously question if it is desirable.

6. Often, I have used the term *self-development*. That feels better. I may try to create the conditions in which you and your congregation could develop yourselves. This is then your work, your achievement, your responsibility.

7. Similarly, I do believe that people can change. I have grave misgivings about trying to change people. I have often observed that people fear that I am going to set about trying to change them. I can see the protective barriers going up; quite right too.

#### **Defended**

One fellow-member of the Development Commission described a certain type of person to watch out for. 'You can often spot them in meetings,' he said. 'They tend to sit glaring, with their arms folded tightly across their chest. And a sort of invisible balloon appears above their heads, with words saying, "*Go on then, develop us!*"'

I am convinced, because I have seen it over and over again, that given the right conditions and encouragement, many people will gladly choose to change themselves.

8. I am suspicious of generalisations. Alarm bells ring when I hear words to the effect that 'Unitarians do this' or 'they won't do that', or 'they like this' or 'they don't like that'. Also that Southerners do this, Northerners that, or that Welsh Unitarians are different from Scots who are different from English. Mentally, or sometimes out loud, I say, 'Well *some* Unitarians do this *sometimes*.'

9. I am suspicious of simple answers to complicated questions. I don't trust them. All questions concerning people and how they live are complicated because people are complicated. There is no 'one clue' or 'one way forward'. There is no 'simple gospel'. Seek out a *variety* of responses, a whole *repertoire* of different ideas and different approaches for different people and the chances of development are enhanced.

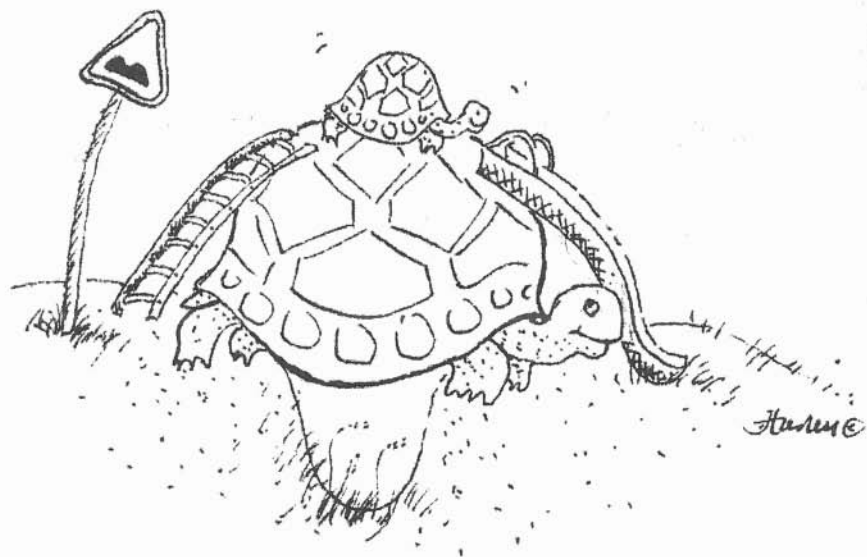
10. I have a strong dislike of the word *problem*. I cannot always avoid using it, but when I can find a better word, I do. The word problem tends to act like a full stop. Development work often consists of transforming full stops into commas.

11. I believe congregations should be as free from guilt feelings as possible.

12. Promoting the development of a congregation should frequently be fun. If I seem to have gone a long time without having fun, I'm sure I am getting it wrong.

13. Development lies somewhere between love and fear and is built on trustful relationships.

Sam says...



*Trust doesn't just happen, it needs to be built.*

## MEET SAM

---

**DURING THE EARLY DAYS** of my work as Development Officer, I introduced a mascot for development work - a tortoise called *Sam*. This creature was taken straight from the Aesop's fable, *The Hare and the Tortoise*.

The fable is familiar. Hare teases Tortoise for her slowness, and challenges her to a race. The course and winning post are agreed, and off they set.

Hare is easily distracted and, being confident that he does not need to apply himself to winning, 'hares off' all over the place, eventually turning up at the winning post to find Tortoise already there. 'Slow and steady wins the race', is Aesop's moral, and it has stuck.

Let's look at the tale a little more closely. Hare has terrific arrogance but no application. He doesn't think through the task before him, nor apply himself to it.

Tortoise has quiet self-assurance. She accepts the challenge, imagines (envisions) the goal, and mentally plans her way of achieving it. She sets herself to win and keeps on going, slow and steady, until she gets there.

What better mascot could we have for Unitarian development? For we are not attempting a dramatic revival with an evangelical campaign. There are no speedy miracles. We are not lacking in application. In all the various ways we have tried to bring growth to our congregations, we have had to say, over and over, 'It takes time.'



We are trying to be like the Tortoise, thinking ahead of the goals we want to achieve, then planning the route, encouraging everyone to keep on, slow and steady, not despairing, until the winning-line, or rather many winning-lines, are crossed.

The important thing is to be mindful of what you are aiming for, and keep on towards the goal.

Sam says...



*If you don't know where you're going, you're likely to end up somewhere else.*

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

Does your congregation ever set goals for itself? Do you have anyone who could lead a 'goal-setting exercise' for you?

## DOES ANYBODY KNOW ANYTHING?

---

**I HAVE A VIVID RECOLLECTION** that during the debate about setting up the Development Commission, a ministerial colleague said, 'If anybody knows anything about how to make our congregations grow, *why don't they tell us?*'

This merits a lot of comment. *Does* anyone know anything about how congregations develop and grow?

The answer is *yes*.

It is widely assumed that church congregations are something of a mystery. They are just there because they have always been there. The idea that someone might have studied them, analysed who and what congregations are, how they tick, how they decline or grow and that there is a body of knowledge that can be studied, often causes real surprise.

It is no secret. There is a substantial body of knowledge about congregations. It is to be found largely in books.

### **In the bookshop**

Anyone can go to a bookshop or library and get something on how to make their flowers grow, or their vegetables grow, or their children grow or even to make their money grow! Why not a book on how to make your congregation grow?

Much of this literature has been generated and recorded in the USA. This factor puts some people off (and merits a chapter of its own).

Also, much of it (though by no means all) is written by Christians of a persuasion different from ours. Reading their work, or listening to them talk, one has to make some adjustments in language and thought-form.

There is also knowledge produced by the world of business, and by voluntary organisations. This too requires adaptation.

But the knowledge is there all right.

We know, however, that there are different sorts of knowledge. Learning to improve the life and work of a congregation is not like learning how to fix a broken machine. Congregations consist of people, so the learning is all about human beings - how they tick, how they relate, what inspires them, what frightens them, what they will do and what they won't.

So the question arises, if we look at this body of knowledge about congregations, what are we going to do with it?

### **A kind of learning**

There is a distinctive kind of learning that applies to situations like marriage or families. A book on relationships will help and may even open your eyes wonderfully. Listening to someone talk about relationships will help, perhaps help a lot. But there is more to it. There must be a willingness to learn, and the implications of that are great. Imagine a couple deciding that their marriage is not going well and they are deeply unhappy. They seek out a marriage counsellor and say, 'We want to know how to improve our relationship. You tell us what to do and we'll do it and then we'll be all right, won't we?'

No. It simply isn't like that. Just as no-one can give step-by-step instructions to another person on how to live their life, so no-one can give that kind of instruction on how to revitalise a congregation.

It is a matter of discerning not only what to learn but how to learn it. There *is* knowledge. In the USA there are institutes for the study of congregations. The Alban Institute is one, the Yokefellow Institute is another and there are more. They undertake research, publish books and magazines, and offer training courses in congregational development. They even provide consultants to work with congregations. Our colleagues in the UUA have a whole department given over to this and staff available to help congregations learn.

In recent years, this is what the Development Commission and others have endeavoured to provide for our Unitarian movement. The purpose of this collection of essays is to be an introduction to the whole body of knowledge sometimes called Congregational Studies. As a field of study it is wide, varied, challenging, sometimes very funny and very exciting.

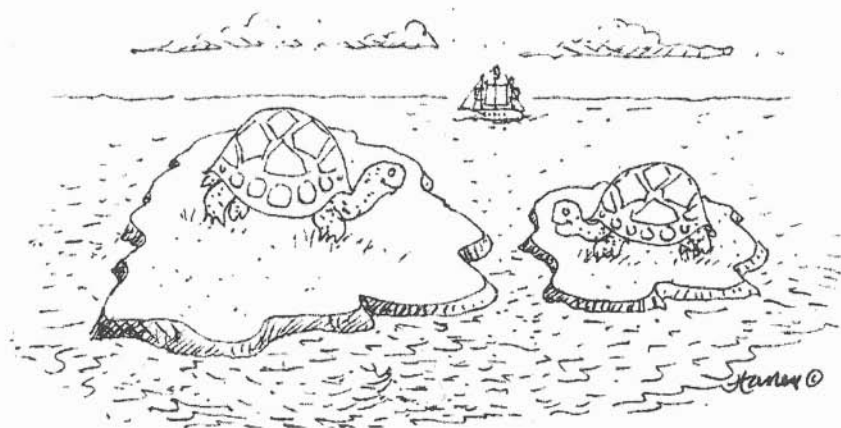
Yes, somebody does know something, quite a lot in fact. If you are willing to face the challenge of learning, you can get to know it too. Among other things, you will probably find, as I have found, that you already know a lot more than you realise, and *that* is something always worth learning. Often, writings on development consist of articulating what is already known.

I believe the best way to handle this knowledge is to read it and discuss it with like-minded people who care about their congregation and want to do some thinking about how to improve things. Make whatever adjustments to *your* congregation that you feel appropriate. Then try out the ideas that seem relevant, and discuss them some more. Generate ideas of your own, and get discussions and dialogue going with others who, like you, are ready to explore.

**Health warning**

This is only a start. Be warned, once you get into this way of thinking and acting, it tends to catch on and become enjoyable. Development is not something you do once and then try something else. Development is an attitude of mind.

Sam says...



*Learn. The larger the island of knowledge, the longer the shore-line of wonder.*

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

Has your congregation got started in development work? Do you feel you are on your own in wanting to try to improve things? Do you feel generally excited and optimistic about the future of your congregation? Who shares your point of view?

## THE SAME...

### ONLY MORE SO!

---

**MEMBERS OF OUR CONGREGATIONS** are sometimes put off the idea of doing some development work by the fact that much of the knowledge and the fresh approaches that are being put forward have come from North America. 'Ah, but... America is different,' comes the response. 'It won't work here.'

That reaction, that statement, is true and not true at the same time.

I make no claims to be an expert on the USA, but I will share what I have experienced and give my conclusions, briefly thus: 'Yes, the USA is different from the UK in significant ways (and Canada is different too) but there are strong similarities. They are more like than unlike us.' And, 'Yes, if we want to re-invigorate our congregations, it won't work to simply import, wholesale, the American way of doing things. On the other hand, there is much we can learn. Much has been learned and is being learned.'

The over-enthusiastic regard the USA as Utopia, and return starry-eyed and agog from visits to large, busy, affluent churches. Cynics regard the USA as a hopelessly materialistic society, full of know-it-all 'experts'. You are invited to set both of these views on one side as unhelpful. The USA is a large, varied, complicated society, and almost anything you care to say about it will be true, of some of the people in some places. Likewise, what you say will be untrue for other people in other places. We are wise, I think, to be careful and hesitant about generalisations. I am not at all sure that there is a typical American, and I don't much like generalisations about

Americans, just as I am not keen on Americans making generalisations about what they may regard as 'typically British'.

The USA is much more of a church-going country than the UK (Canada somewhat less than the USA). In the USA, something like 40-45% of the population are frequent church-goers. In the UK the figure is 8-10%. That figure is slightly higher for Wales and Scotland, and Northern Ireland is altogether different.

Obtaining clear information about church-going in the UK is not easy. If you ask people in the street about their church-going frequency and process the replies, you would obtain one figure for church attendances. If you then asked the churches how many people actually attend on Sundays, you will get a figure which amounts to *about half of the first one!* Either people lie, or imagine that they attend church more than they in fact do.

The reasons for the higher rate of church-going in the USA are complex. One factor is that there is no religious education (RE) in schools, so parents wanting RE for their children need to seek out a good congregation with an RE programme of which they approve.

Another factor is that many (though by no means all) churches have an ethnic character. Americans whose background is say, German, may seek out fellow German-Americans at the Lutheran church. Greeks may go to the Greek Orthodox, Portuguese and Spanish to the appropriate (but not any) Catholic church. Church is often a place people attend to affirm ethnic roots. Also, in the USA there is no established church or religion like the Church of England or Church of Scotland (that many people *nominally* support) where their religion is upheld by the establishment, even though most folk do not participate. In this sense, church-goers in the USA, their ministers and other leaders have to work very positively at maintaining their congregations.



If nothing else, that sense of 'working positively at it' is something that we in the UK can benefit from learning. There is, I feel, among our congregations, a strong sense that churches and congregations have somehow always been there, that they have a life of their own and there is nothing anyone can do to, as it were, get into the driving seat and make them function more effectively. They feel that 'church' is not an organisation to be managed in that way.

Ah, but it is, it is. The supreme factor in the decline and closure of a church is the feeling that nothing can be done. The supreme factor in turning a congregation around from decline to growth is a sense that the members can take their destiny into their own hands and be responsible for their congregation's life and well-being.

So, I often feel that compared with the UK, North America is *the same only more so*.

Some of our UK congregations are in good health, with good attendances and high quality, lively activities. In the USA, it is the same only more so. In the UK, some of our congregations are just ticking over, doing what they have always done, set in their ways. Some congregations in the USA are like that too, only more so, because there are more of them.

Some British Unitarians are dedicated, hard-working, enthusiastic, steeped in their Unitarianism, knowledgeable, generous and committed. Good numbers of people in the USA are like that too, only more so. That is, they tend on the whole to show their feelings of enthusiasm for their faith, and their knowledge of their heritage, more openly than British folk.

Some UK congregations are in poor shape - depressed, run down, pessimistic, in the grip of almost a death-wish. Some congregations in the USA are like that too, only more so. It tends to show up more in a society where churches are busy and often flourishing places.

One Sunday I visited a church which I immediately sensed was in a poor way. The building looked adequate, but had clearly seen better days. The front door was locked, but a note pinned on it told me the service was being held in the Sunday school. I went round to a side entrance and, walking along a gloomy corridor, I sidestepped a bucket, there to catch the raindrops from a leaking roof. This was summer, the service was being held in the school because many people were away. 'There won't be many here today,' came the apologetic words from the minister. 'This room needs redecorating, but it's better to be in here. It's smaller, and has a piano. We have no organist today.'

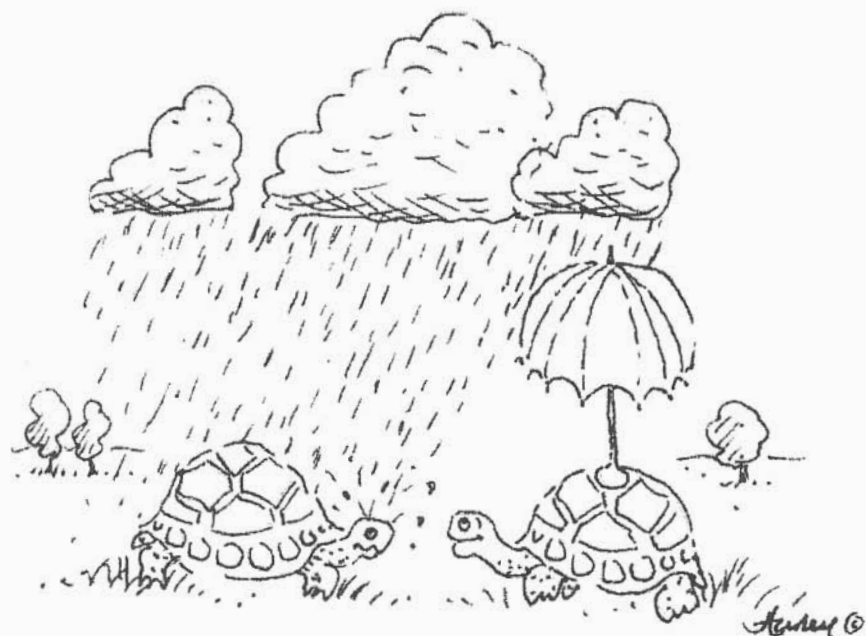
This church was a Unitarian Universalist congregation near Boston, Massachusetts.

Yes, Americans have their problems too.

The most significant factor in this church that I have described is that once I began to listen to the minister and the congregation, I could discern a real determination to take charge of things and face their future responsibly and with determination, plus a confidence that they could 'turn things around'. Problems were there to be seen and were plentiful in number. Depressed and negative ways of thinking were almost entirely absent.

With different details and in a different context, we in the UK could be like that too. The challenges we face, as compared with our North American cousins, are the same, only more so!

Sam says...



*Developing congregations plan for change. Stuck congregations let change happen to them.*

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

When you hear the word 'American', what is your feeling? What do you think we can learn from the UUA? What do you think is totally inappropriate in the way they do things as compared with British ways?

## WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

---

**THE LAST FEW DECADES** have been the age of the ecumenical movement. This has meant different things to different people. Some Unitarians have been involved in ecumenical activities, either at a local or national level. Others have not, because they are not interested, or because they have not been welcomed into ecumenical groups.

As I see it, the effect of the ecumenical movement that has been most significant is that it is nowadays regarded as undesirable to vie for membership, in competition with other churches. This is most apparent in the reluctance of ministers and others conducting worship to attack or criticise other denominations. In the past, much of what was preached about and talked about in our congregations was along the lines of 'orthodox Christians believe this, but we have reinterpreted it and nowadays believe something different'. In the present climate, such comparisons are regarded as either odious or not particularly relevant.

Those who think that critical comparisons are odious frequently have the impulse to say, instead, 'We want to promote Unitarianism positively, and not be forever proclaiming what we are against. We want Unitarianism to stand on its own feet, and not be presented over against other religious standpoints.' From time to time, to this point of view is added the view that Unitarians regard all religions as equal. We are all going the same way, aren't we? Others, presently non-churchgoers, may add that one church is as good as another. In the minds of many, at this point it all becomes a confused blur.

Sure enough, a Unitarianism conveyed simply as against orthodoxy would be built on shaky foundations. If there is one point that has come across from, among other areas, the Women's Movement, it is the thought that it is perfectly possible to be *for* something without necessarily being *against* something else. Most members of the Women's Movement are *for* the needs and interests of women, without being distinctly anti-men. Human experience is not, in my view, divided simply into what we are for and what we are against.

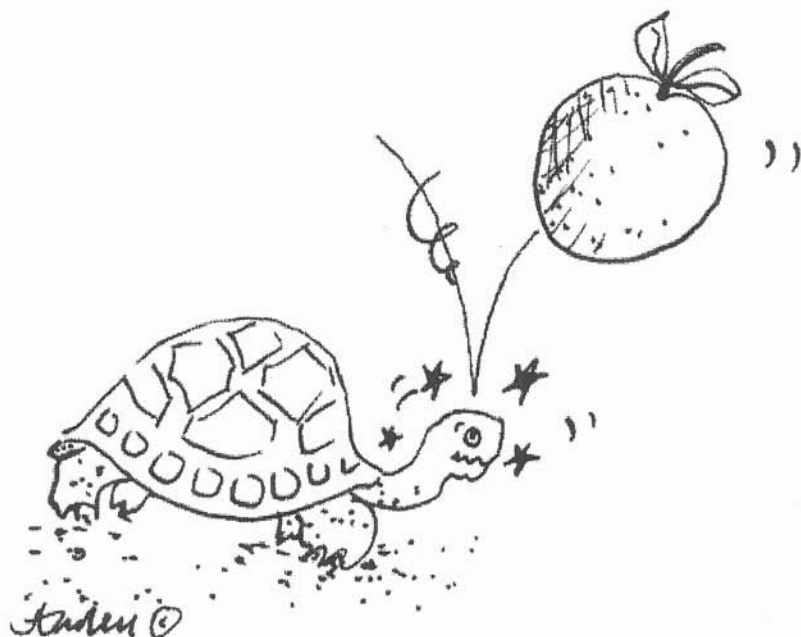
We are perfectly entitled, however, to express our distinctive character, and allow people to discern what distinguishes Unitarians from others. As a movement, we need a clear identity, and each of our congregations needs a clear identity, so that anyone looking at us, in any way, has an immediate idea or impression of who we are and what we are offering. It could well be argued that this clear identity is the greatest need facing our congregations and our movement.

Underlying all of this is the current state of church-going in Britain. We are very aware that church-going is at a low ebb. It affects all denominations. So, when we see some churches, contrary to the trend, doing well, we ought to feel glad. I say this because I have come to believe that if *all* churches grow, ours will grow too. If all churches are in decline, ours will suffer decline too. In this sense, I find myself favourably disposed to anything that might encourage church-going generally. If church-going were to enjoy a revival, we would get our share.

In that sense, whatever our theologies, character or identity, we are all in this together.

What do you think?

Sam says...



*There is always something to learn...*

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

Think about another church of another denomination, say the one nearest to you. You may even want to take a walk down the street and look at it. What stands out to you as indicating its *identity*? Try writing down, 'That's the church where they.....' What?

Having done this, go back to your own church, and ask yourself the same question. What would an outsider think when considering your church? What is the most obvious identifying feature? Are you happy with the identity that you present? How could you improve it?

It may be worth giving some thought to why it is that some people get impatient when it comes to discussion or planning sessions. The cry of 'Oh, come on, let's get on with it!' can indicate a number of things. It might mean that the discussion is not going well, or it might mean that the impatient soul present does not want to consider what might go wrong! On the whole it is best to make sure a thorough discussion takes place first.

In the beginning was the word.

On the other side, it can also be said that if all the discussion seems to lead nowhere, decisions are just never made, and the work or responsibilities are never apportioned, then there is something wrong with the discussion. Good, thorough, purposeful discussion does not just happen by accident, and our congregations need leaders who know how to guide discussion meetings so that it is all satisfactory for everyone participating.

Some of our congregations consist of people who are quite used to discussions and dialogues, others not. It may be that a congregation has first to learn how to hold effective group discussions before they do anything else. There is a considerable skill in leading a good discussion group. 'Group dynamics' sounds like a fearful bit of jargon, but it refers to an understanding of what goes on when a number of people talk together. Who dominates (and why), who is the shy person (and how that person can be helped), who is a good listener and who constantly butts in because they are not really listening? There are disciplines and processes that can be learned to make a group effective. Time needs to be given to that learning. What may seem simple and obvious matters can easily be overlooked, such as the way chairs are arranged in a room, and making prompt starts and finishes. Well-managed, sensitive discussion groups will produce good, creative and effective ideas and plans. A free-for-all muddle will produce a free-for-all muddle.

### **Feelings come in**

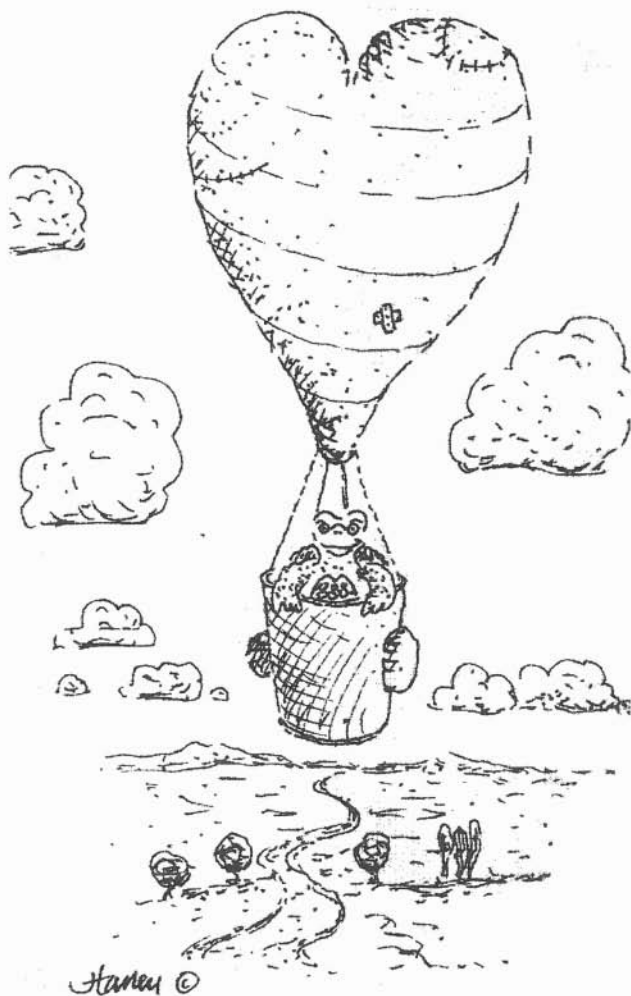
I think it helps to see a distinction between a discussion and a dialogue. I have been privileged to participate in both. This might not be exactly what the words mean, but I see it this way. In a discussion, ideas are shared, on the level of thoughts, facts and opinions. In a dialogue, the conversation involves *feelings*. When people share personal feelings, heart-felt convictions, their experience at an emotional, perhaps even spiritual level, of how things are and how they might be, their dreams and visions, then it becomes dialogue.

Clear-thinking discussion makes situations plain and enables effective planning and good work. When the exchanges move to the deeper level and become dialogue, then (at best) there is a meeting of hearts and minds, the generating of inspiration and vision. In dialogue, there is sharing, relationship-building and commitment, that enable the growth of the individuals, and then transform the group. This growth and transformation is what brings development. It is worth all the time, patience and understanding to bring this about.

Dialogue is very close to worship. When hearts and minds are joined in a shared vision in this way, *The Word* becomes a sacrament.



Sam says...



*Development is a matter of the heart.*

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

Does your congregation provide opportunities for discussion of matters of concern about the congregation itself? Is the quality of that discussion satisfactory? Would you call it discussion or dialogue?

## ...AND A NEW WORD

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'Cheshire-Puss,' she began, rather timidly. 'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?'

'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the cat.

'I don't much care where,' said Alice.

'Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the cat.

Lewis Carroll  
*Alice in Wonderland*

**A TOPIC THAT MERITS** exploration at this point involves looking at a new word; at least, it was a new word to me. I recall vividly the time I first came across it. It was in the USA and it may well be an American word. It certainly has an American sound, and I felt strongly at the time that I wouldn't be able to use it in Britain. I've changed my mind.

The word is *intentionality*.

I was involved in a workshop that looked at this word, this concept, in some depth. At the end, I went to the workshop leader and said, 'I need your help. I am sure that if I go back to Britain and use that word it will put people right off. I need another word.'

The best we could come up with was *purposefulness*.

The crucial matter under consideration here is to discern whether a congregation really wants to develop and grow, and is prepared to do

it by intention, with intentionality. The more I came to look at the concept, the more I realised how important it is.

There are many folk in our congregations who will express a wish for development. 'We need more people....' they will say. They may even insist that they are doing things that are developmental, and they may be right. It is frequently claimed, 'Well, we have tried some new things' and 'Well, everything we do is for development, isn't it?' If that is true, good.

It makes a tremendous difference, however, if there is a clear, open, high level of real intentionality in the efforts for development. If a congregation contemplates development with a view to growth then much more will be achieved if, from the outset it is understood and declared out loud that there needs to be a good, strong sense of intentionality, purposefulness, and commitment.

An example may clarify this.

I have led a number of congregations through a series of developmental exercises called *The Manual of Congregational Self-Development*. This has always proved challenging, often more challenging than was at first realised by the participants. In introducing *The Manual* to intending users (a church committee or a discussion group) I have raised the matter of intentionality. It is not always easy to convey. For many folk, doing *The Manual* was simply a series of discussions on interesting topics, that one could take or leave, agree with or disagree with. It soon becomes clear, however, that when *The Manual* becomes effective, it arouses the real convictions of the participants and their willingness to explore themselves, their groups, their congregation as a whole, why it exists and where it is going, with a view to making some real changes. As soon as the matter of change comes into the discussion, all sorts of concerns, sometimes real anxieties arise. To go ahead with the talking and planning and to undertake the plans for growth and change,

requires *intentionality*, strong purposefulness. If that is not present, little or nothing will happen.

To take the matter a little further, I am aware that all living things grow. Growth is part of being. What this concept of intentionality does is encourage people to recognise their natural impulse to grow, then tap into the growth and focus it in a positive way and be purposeful, perhaps purposive (with a specific end in view).

From the outset of any developmental work in a congregation, those involved need to ask:

- do we really want to see this congregation develop and grow?
- are we prepared to commit ourselves to this from the outset?
- are we prepared to discuss all the issues, as honestly as we can?
- are we prepared to go through patiently what may be difficult times together, and not give up?
- are we prepared to contemplate changing things that need to be changed, despite the risks that may be involved?

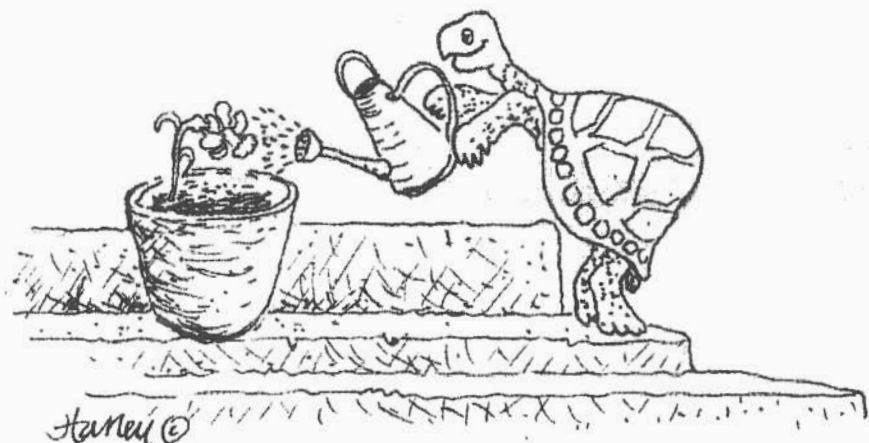
If a group can give a firm 'yes' to all these, the intentionality level is high and there is a good chance that much will be achieved. As development work continues, the intentionality level must be checked and maintained.

**Challenge and excitement**

Development work can sometimes involve facing some challenging, even stressful periods. On the other hand, it has been my more frequent experience that once a group gets going in development it becomes exciting, enjoyable, stimulating and satisfying. I have been privileged to be with people getting to the point when they say, 'Hey, the more I think about this, the more potential I can see for some really exciting activities around here...' or, 'You know, this has made me more aware of the good things we've got to offer...' or, 'I think things are really starting to look up around here... this is great...there's no going back!'

Development can become deeply rewarding and enjoyable. Just muddling along hoping that development will happen is not enough. It is intentionality that does it.

Sam says...



*Real growth comes by intention, not by accident.*

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

I have sometimes said to a group in a congregation, 'I have here a poster. Would you be willing to display it on your church notice-board? It says, *THIS CONGREGATION IS GROWING!*'

Would *you* be willing to display this at *your* church? What difference would it make if you did?

# LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

and

## EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

---

**'AH WELL, WE ALL LEARN** from experience!'

Usually these words come after some difficult, trying or even painful experience. The usual intention is to try to console someone who has been through a bad time, or perhaps to try to make sense of a confusion. It does not often happen that people use these words when something splendid, successful or pleasurable has happened. It is hard to say why. Perhaps we do not tend to think we learn from joyful times, only the painful ones. We hear people say, 'Ah well, we all learn by our mistakes,' but rarely if ever do we hear them say, 'We all learn from our successes!'

The worst situation is the one where people do not seem to be learning at all. For there is no guarantee that learning occurs. There are congregations where the members simply go on doing what they have always done, and in the old way, repeating the known formulas and 'safe' procedures.

There is the learning that comes by intention and there is that which is forced upon us by events. There can be no doubt that intentional learning is far more effective and satisfying than continuous chapters of bruising accidents and reliance on good luck.

How do we learn by intention? The answer is that *we give time to it*. We plan time to think about our work and activities and consider what we are doing. It is known as *reflection*. We are familiar with the phrase that begins, 'Now I come to reflect on it...,' or simply, 'On reflection...'

Sometimes there is a part of our worship service that provides for this. It is sometimes called a period of quiet reflection (often the silent prayer or meditation time). For those not used to it, it takes a little practice. It can be used in a variety of ways. One way is to mentally go over some significant experience, and say, 'What did that mean to me...? What have I learned from that...? How would I have done it differently...? What does it teach me about myself...? If I have to face a situation like that again, what shall I do...? What a good experience that was...why was it so good...? What values, what blessings did I experience then...? Is there anyone I should thank...?'

For those who have come to know and appreciate this element of our worship services, this can be a very significant time, sometimes even the most important part of the whole service.

\*

Or perhaps there is opportunity for this reflection-learning to take place in a committee meeting. It can be valuable there too. One way of including it is to have something called 'Review of Past Events' as a regular agenda item. It is not difficult. It is simply a matter of listing the activities that have occurred since the previous meeting, and raising them for review or reflection.

One example of this might be a review of the Sunday services. Ask the Minister to remind the meeting of the titles or the themes of the services during the past month, and give some comments by way of feedback. It may take a little getting used to, but most Ministers



welcome responses if conveyed constructively. Or if your services have been conducted by visitors, remind yourselves of the services one by one and reflect on them, what you appreciated, what was not so good, and why.

A similar exercise can be undertaken concerning other activities, like social events or study courses, discussion groups or working parties, visits to other events - in fact everything is worth a second look, some reflection, to see what can be learned.

It is possible to make this into a healthy habit. It goes like this:

Activity - reflection - learning - new activity influenced by learning - reflection - more learning...and so on.

That is learning by experience in a positive and intentional way, and it can be immensely rewarding. It won't just happen - time and attention must be given to it. Most of all it takes away the feeling of just muddling along, doing one thing after another with no real sense of purpose or appreciation and life becomes a grey blur. Action and reflection brings in the colour. It can do great things for your committee meeting!

\*

*Experiential learning* is the name given to something rather similar to what has been described, but it is not quite the same. It is perhaps more like 'learning by doing', a practical exercise.

For example, someone could give a talk to a discussion group about the importance of a lively church magazine. The speaker could talk about layout and content and illustrations and give tips on what to include and how to type and photocopy it. There could even be suggestions about illustrations, such as a picture on the cover and a flaming chalice.

That would be an interesting talk, perhaps even a formal lecture on the church magazine.

Another way would be to do a practical exercise or two. One might, for example gather together a whole collection of magazines from other congregations and give one to each member of your committee or discussion group. They could then be asked to do a review of the magazine, saying what it contained, what they liked about it, what was revealing about the congregation's life and activities, what beliefs or values were conveyed, what general impression they got of the health or morale of the congregation. They could then consider what ideas, about both content and presentation, they could take from other people's magazines, in order to develop their own.

That would be a much more experiential exercise. Rather than talking about such things in an abstract way, there would be actual illustrations to look at and learn from.

Another experiential exercise could be this:

Arrange for the discussion group to actually produce an edition of a magazine. Have the facilities available, a typewriter or word processor plus paper and any other items needed, including pictures or drawings for illustrations. Agree on the content, work together on the layout and actually go through the experience of producing a church magazine.

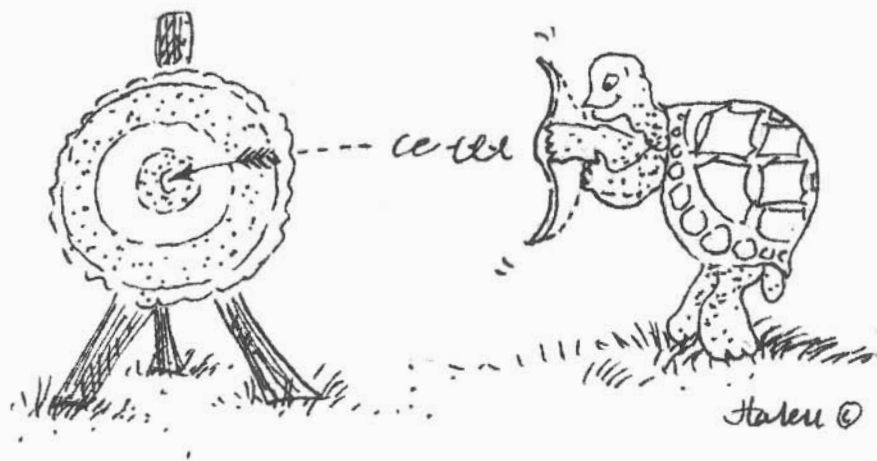
If all goes well, by the end of the exercise, you should have a product - an edition of the magazine to send out.

That indeed would be experiential learning. It means not only contemplating the theories behind whatever it is you are trying to do, it also means going through the actual experience of doing it. That would develop understanding of what a magazine is for, and also

develop skills in achieving it. It is a wonderful way to learn and can be applied to all sorts of other topics and situations.

Learning does not simply mean sitting in straight rows listening to one person delivering a talk or lecture. There are many ways to learn, and members of our congregations need opportunities to try all of them.

Sam says...



*Tell me and I forget. Show me and I remember. Involve me and I understand.*

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

Are there opportunities for reflective discussion of all the various aspects of life in your congregation? Could you establish such opportunities? Are there people who would find such reflection uncomfortable? If so, why is this?

## START WITH US

---

**FOR MOST FOLK** in our congregations, the whole world of development is strange, perhaps even a little frightening. Some people cannot get away from the thought that development means that someone is going to come along and change you into something that you do not want to become. Another reason for the choice of Sam the tortoise as the mascot of development is to present a friendly and patient character, in order to chase away this misapprehension.

The task of making a start in development is often the hardest one. 'What are we supposed to do? How do we start? Where do we start?'

Also, frequent comments are made at this point that refer to our GA and our District Associations. I have heard people ask, usually as a question and often in a critical tone, 'Why doesn't the GA do something? What are those people doing at Essex Hall?' Also, it is often said, 'I think the District could do more.'

All of these comments have some validity. The response that I have given, however, to this line of inquiry has often surprised people, especially if they are members of a small congregation that feels to be struggling.

I have usually said something like this. 'Please do not look to the GA to develop your congregation. Please do not look to the District Association, at least, not yet. The real work of development for this congregation begins right here, with you - with us. I do not believe there is any value in looking for someone or something 'out there' to come winging in to solve your problems that are causing you to

struggle. If there is to be a beginning for the development and growth of this congregation, it will begin here, with you, with us.'

The response to this varies. Some people find it very encouraging, inspiring even, to think that they have the potential to bring about their own growth and a change in their own fortunes.

Others are troubled by this thought. If their morale is low and their resources small, the idea that 'it is up to you' sounds terribly daunting. There are sometimes tell-tale signs that people reveal, indicating that they prefer to look outside for some sort of rescue. The appeals for the GA to do something or the District to do something have already been mentioned. They are examples of looking outside. They are similar to the instinct to begin by looking for new members. 'If only we had more people. We need to get newcomers...we need more members...we need new blood...' There is a widespread belief that if only the GA would launch a massive publicity drive then newcomers would stream in through the door and say, 'Here we are! We have come to rescue you from your struggles!'

It often surprises people and sometimes even shocks them when I respond differently. I will say, 'Let's not look outward towards new people at this stage. Let's look inwards first and start with ourselves. If we want people to join us, let's be clear and confident about what they are joining! Let's ask ourselves a question, 'What has this congregation got to offer?' and 'How can we *improve* what we have to offer?'

It is almost always better to pose two questions rather than one. If one question is asked, then one response is usually given and that is the end of the matter. If two questions are asked, this tends to start a discussion.

Sam says..



*Activity attracts. Do nothing, no-one will be attracted.*

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

What are the 'benefits of membership' of your congregation? Could you draw up a list of all the good things that your congregation has to offer? Are you comfortable with the question, 'How can we improve...?'

## *SUMUS QUOD SUMUS*

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**MANY SMALL CONGREGATIONS** make the mistake of trying to live up to the standards of big churches. They then suffer from low self-esteem. This shows up when they apologise for their small numbers, or constantly recall 'the good old days', or give excuses why people happen to be missing any particular Sunday.

There is no need. It is unhealthy and unproductive. It is not a sin to be a small congregation. Small groups have something to offer that large groups don't have. Many members of our small congregations would not want to be part of a large one, even if they had the chance. There are large congregations that envy the intimacy of a small congregation.

This is not intended to advocate complacency. Development and growth are good.

A good morale and large numbers are not necessarily the same. It is possible to have a small congregation with a good morale, a high level of self-confidence.

Start your congregation's development by cultivating some self-acceptance. Let's borrow a Latin quotation to help us. *Sumus Quod Sumus* - We Are What We Are. Don't move on to the next stage of development until you can repeat that slogan together with confidence.

A second, highly valuable exercise is to share your thoughts about what you value in the congregation. In a discussion group, invite each

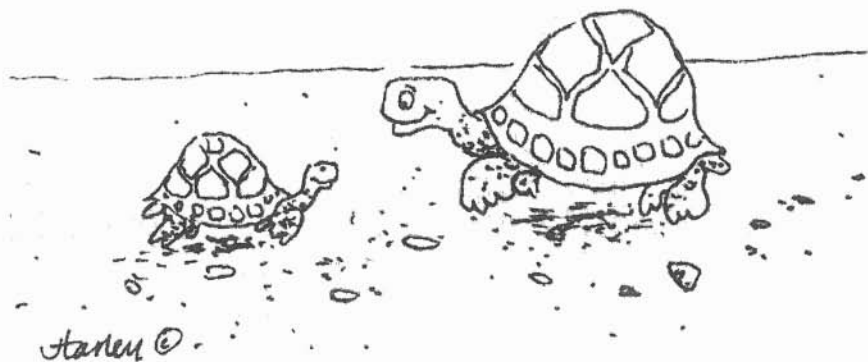
member to write on a card, the following words: 'The thing I most appreciate about this congregation is....' Then ask them to complete the sentence in their own words. Then take turns to read them to one another.

I recall the time I undertook an exercise of this kind with a congregation that was in low spirits. At the end, a member of the group said, with tears in her eyes, 'You know, to be honest we already know all of this. But isn't it good to say it out loud!'

When you have accepted yourselves, your weaknesses and your strengths (these latter often greater than you realise) then you can feel more confident, and develop further. When you feel better about what you are, you can then start to consider what *you can become*. The memories of what you were once might help a little in this, but not much.

Much more helpful are your dreams, hymns, prayers, readings, discussions and plans for what you can *become*. Try dreaming and talking about that. Then set to work to make the dreams come true.

Sam says...



*The future is made of the same stuff as the present.*



**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

How high would you rate the morale of your congregation? In discussion, do you find it easier to talk about the past than it is to talk about the future? If you were, as a congregation, to make a will, what would you bequeath to the future?

## WHAT DOES YOUR CHURCH DO BEST?

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**AN ARTICLE IN A CHURCH MAGAZINE** told of a congregation wracked with problems. There were money problems, building problems, leadership, administrative and personality problems. So the members decided to call in an expert, a congregational consultant.

Are there such people? Yes. This took place in the USA, but there are people who have studied congregations, and how they tick, in Britain too. The day came for the consultant's visit. Everyone gathered and waited for words of wisdom to come from the expert.

'I'll start by asking a question,' he said. 'What does your church do best?'

There was a long, amazed silence. Then, at first almost painfully, faltering answers began to come forward: discussion of good experiences, satisfying features of the church's life, happy memories of recent good events. By the end of the evening things were beginning to look and feel much better.

What lessons can we learn from this story? One is that it is possible to take a look at a congregation and do some careful thinking about it, with a view to improving things. Do not just accept the status quo. The future is in your hands.

The second and very significant point is that it sometimes takes an outsider to join the discussion to help you see something you may not see yourselves.

Thirdly, it is easy to get bogged down in problems and lose sight of strengths. Don't ignore problems, but it is not advisable to ignore strengths either.

Having listed your strengths, consider what could be done to develop them. There is always room for improvement. There is a good chance that if you do both of these you will discover new elements to your congregation's life that you haven't tried before, and develop in new directions too.

If you start by discussing your 'problems', you will probably end by discussing them too. Start by considering what you do best.

Sam says...



Samen ©

*Claim your strengths. Expand your strengths. Add new strengths.  
And do it in that order.*

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

What does your church do best? Share your thoughts with your friends, or with a discussion group, or your committee. If it would help, invite a sympathetic visitor to lead your discussion.

## WHY DO YOU DO IT?

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**ONE WAY TO GET TO THE HEART** of a congregation in order to encourage people (a word which actually means to give heart or more heart) is to discuss, among willing participants, why they support this congregation. What is it that motivates people to come, give their money and time, and work long and hard for 'the cause'?

If we know what motivates people, there is a chance that we can do a number of things:

- We can enhance their motivation.
- We can help people enjoy their work and worship and gain more satisfaction from their endeavours.
- We can encourage and inspire more people to join in.

If other people see or hear about a group of happy enthusiasts working hard for their church, the chances are that their curiosity will be aroused. On the other hand, if the central core of workers seems weary, unenthusiastic and dissatisfied, just plodding on from a mere sense of duty - 'well somebody has to do it' - then it is unlikely that volunteers will be forthcoming. Just as nothing succeeds like success, so nothing generates enthusiasm like enthusiasts!

Often, we hear complaints about apathy. 'People won't come, they won't do anything, they won't help. They are just too apathetic.'

I cannot accept that in any simple, straight-forward way. There is plenty of energy and excitement inside people. It is there to be activated, to be brought out and people given exciting opportunities to join in.

I believe that the stimulating and motivating factors do not just happen in a church. They need to be thought about and attended to. It may seem strange to be even thinking about it. You may be disposed to say, 'Well people are either enthusiastic or they are not. You can't make people feel enthusiastic if they aren't!' That's too passive a view. We all appreciate encouragement. Ensure there is plenty around. In the past, many activities in a church began with opening worship, a hymn, a prayer or reading. In time this became an empty routine, and fell out of fashion. There might be a case for re-introducing it. Make sure that the prayer, reading or hymn are *positive, uplifting, forward-looking*. Make a collection of readings and prayers that have this character. Go through the hymn-book and mark the ones that have a stimulating and encouraging feel to them. Report good news. Celebrate achievements. Thank people for doing good and helpful things.

#### **A plea**

Don't let cynical jokes pass, challenge them. If someone volunteers, and the resident 'joker' says, 'Hey, you've got a job for life there Fred,' see if you can challenge that. Say something like, 'Hey no, don't say that. That makes it sound like a terrible burden. It shouldn't be. Let's thank Fred for offering and give him our support in the important job he's going to do for us.' You may get some funny looks at first - but join me in a campaign to stop cynical humour. It doesn't help, it usually isn't funny, and is often just a habit people get into because they have lost the ability to be open and realistic. Injecting a note of realism can convey that you take seriously what people do. Once they understand this, people get to accept it and in fact appreciate it.

Cynical humour is just a symptom of burn-out and possibly a symptom of fear.

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

1. What would you like to see more of taking place in your congregation?
2. What would you like to see less of in your congregation?
3. What would you not like to see changed?

No. 1. should provide you with a list of good things that are happening which excite, energise and satisfy people.

No. 2 should provide you with some clues as to what dampens enthusiasm.

Then consider what you, individually, can do to generate enthusiasm.

What can you recommend to the whole congregation, to generate more enthusiasm? Consider collecting stimulating and uplifting quotations and passages from your members, and publish them, either in your magazine or a separate booklet.

## A MESSAGE OF HOPE

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*There abide faith, hope and love, these three. And the greatest of these is love.*

1 Corinthians 13

**ONE WAY TO PROMOTE** the development and growth of a congregation is to learn from the successful ones. If we were to take a look at congregations that are growing and ask the question, 'What are they doing *right*?' we might discern factors that are helpful. We may then have to decide whether these can be tried in our Unitarian congregations. Sometimes the answer will be yes, sometimes no.

If it were discernible, for example, that a church was thriving in Sunday attendance figures because the minister was a strict authoritarian and *demanding* frequent attendance, we would probably feel that that could not be applied to our situation. As one minister, (not a Unitarian) once put it, 'They would rather come to see me in church on Sunday than have me go to see them on Monday!' Nowadays few ministers of any denomination have that sort of authority, and it is quite against our traditions to have that sort of fearful relationship between minister and congregation.

By contrast, (at least) two different writers draw attention to those churches that are successful in the support and loyalty that they attract, and point, by way of explanation, not to the fearful authority of the minister, but *the content of the worship*. They affirm that the quality of the worship must be in every respect high, not simply in intellectual content, but also in the setting, the conduct, the feel, the mood and the spirit of the worship. They then focus especially on one



quality that I think we, in the Unitarian movement, can share and focus on too.

It is *hope*.

Hope is one of the spiritual qualities that Paul talked about in that famous letter, 1st Corinthians chapter 13. 'There abide faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love.'

Most Unitarians go along with that. In fact for many it is the only bit of the writings of Paul that they like. But I sometimes think that we have taken it too far - misinterpreted or misunderstood it. When Paul writes, 'The greatest is love..' many seem to think that love is the thing we should focus on, and we need not bother about the other two. I don't think that is what Paul meant.

Most Unitarians are indeed loving people, most Unitarian congregations are loving communities, but many have neglected the other two qualities Paul presents to us. They are strong on love, but weak on faith and hope. Many of our congregations are very weak on hope. Some are even hope-less.

The indications are that congregations devoid of hope, especially in the spirit of their worship, are unlikely to attract growing numbers.

Kennon L. Callahan, a somewhat conservative Christian church consultant, in *Twelve Keys To An Effective Church*, puts it this way. Speaking of effective congregations, their worship and what we can learn from them, he writes:

The sermons are easily followed and they make sense. Second, the sermons involve the humour, struggle and drama of the biblical text and of contemporary living. Third, the sermons share something with the congregation that is hopeful and helpful in the midst of the pain, suffering and injustices of the world.

To sum these points up, preachers in successful congregations deliver sermons that are clear, relevant *and above all hopeful*.

The second writer makes much the same point, but focuses on one of those elements. The first two, clarity and relevance, seem to be taken for granted. In *44 Ways to Increase Church Attendance*, Lyle Schaller writes:

The most common characteristic of the churches that are attracting increasing numbers of people is...what people hear and feel during the worship experience. This is, *a note of hope...*

It would be easy to misinterpret this. Hope is a subtle spiritual quality. There are false hopes and realistic hopes. There are hopes which involve clinging to affirmations despite all the evidence. There is the hope that is the one in a multi-million chance that National Lottery gamblers dream of (cf. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl).

Then there is another kind of hope. It consists of seeing the potential in people and situations, and acting to enhance that potential and bring it out in effective and enjoyable work and worship.

It would be easy and phoney to preach a hope that was not truly felt. The falseness would eventually resonate through, and be counter-productive. Hope does not displace the sorrows and struggles and concerns of the world with false sunshine. But hope is, as Paul says, one of the three basic spiritual qualities by which we live.

It is also true that some folk in our congregations, including loyal attenders and diligent workers, are pessimists. Their view of everything is negative, and they seem resistant to positive, forward looking adventurous religion. They are welcome too, of course and entitled to be heard. But the experience of *growing* congregations tells us that where the note of hope is clear, consistent and

authentically felt and expressed, there is increase in attendances. Where that note of hope is absent, growth is absent too.

If we think this may be true, then it would be worth an experiment. If every worship leader, minister or layperson, made sure that every worship service in a church, for say a year, contained that authentic, clear note of hope, then the attendances at the end of that year should be higher than at the beginning.

Care to try it?

Remember, the note and message of hope has to be authentic. If you, as a worship leader, do not feel hopeful enough to be able to convey hope in every worship service, then the challenge is with *you*. Where is *your* hope? Can you hold your hand from leading worship until you have rediscovered it?

Sam says....



*Hope is stronger than memory.*

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

Do you have a worship group? If your congregation has a worship group or discussion group, and, as well as a minister a number of members willing to conduct a service or perhaps simply deliver an address, plan a series of special services. Make the series as long as you like. Present to the congregation a series of sermons entitled, *My Dreams for the Future of This Congregation*.

## WHAT DO PEOPLE NEED?

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**THE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER** of Blanktown Unitarian Church contains the following items:

'The collection at Sunday's service will be for the UNICEF clean water appeal. On Friday, sandwich-making for homeless people will take place in the kitchen.

We are appealing for clothing and basic medical supplies to be sent to our Unitarian congregations in Transylvania.

The Women's League meets on Monday, the choir rehearses on Tuesday, the discussion group meets on Wednesday, the committee meets on Thursday and the play-reading group on Friday.

Our thanks are due to Josephine Bloggs who has completed five years' excellent work as our treasurer. We are very grateful, and are particularly pleased that she has agreed to represent our congregation at the next GA Annual Meetings. We are fortunate in having a good number of members who give their time and talents to the work of our congregation. We are seeking a new chairperson for our trustees.

Next Sunday's service will be led by the group that has undertaken *Building Your Own Theology*. They will share their personal experiences of this excellent and deeply enriching study-course. One of the members has decided to undertake the GA course in Lay Preaching and the Conduct of Worship, and two others have expressed an interest in attending Lay Leadership School next summer.

The flowers in church at our Sunday services will be distributed to housebound people and those in hospital by the minister and the pastoral care team.'

According to a theory drawn up by the psychologist Abraham Maslow, people have needs which they are constantly seeking to satisfy, and there is a sort of hierarchy of these needs. If a congregation helps to satisfy them, people will come along and join in. If they find that their needs are not being satisfied, they will drift away.

The list of needs looks something like this illustration below. When one level of need is attained, people move on to the next level (The progression is not a necessary one, and people do sometimes move back, depending on their circumstances.).

			Self esteem	Self actualisation
	Safety	Growth		Growth
Physiological	Security	Belonging	Self respect	Personal development
Hunger	Protection from danger	Social activities	Status	Accomplishment
Thirst		Love	Recognition	
Sleep				

### Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

At *Level 1* the needs are very basic and physical: hunger, thirst, sleep. These are the needs satisfied by a mission church, a Salvation Army hostel or basic human relief work.

At *Level 2* the needs are for security and protection from danger. Again, mission churches, hostels and church outreach groups that help with very practical matters will attract people who have these needs.

At *Level 3* the needs are for a sense of belonging, human company and love. Church social activities, church groups and clubs and societies, with effective pastoral care provide for these needs.

At *Level 4* the needs are for self-respect, status and recognition. Active involvement in a good church, with opportunities to do useful work and feel a sense of making a contribution, opportunities to use one's skills or talents in conducting worship, singing, leading, teaching or organising. These activities satisfy these needs.

At *Level 5* the need for personal growth, personal development and a sense of accomplishment. Enriching worship, good RE activities such as *Building Your Own Theology*, moving into more responsible leadership positions locally, nationally, internationally. These experiences satisfy this level of need.

It should not be difficult to spot which needs are being met by the activities reported in Blanktown church's magazine article above.

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

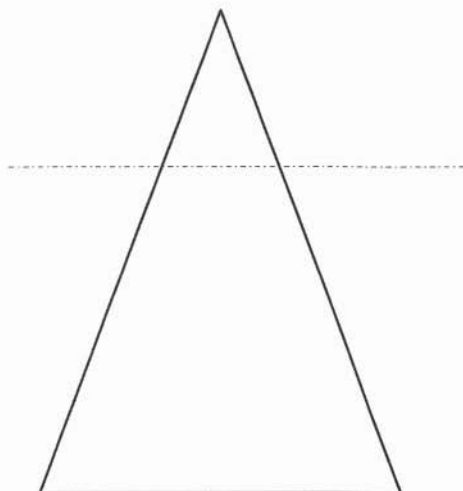
How does your congregation compare? How many of these levels does your congregation succeed in satisfying? What can you do to increase the variety of human needs your congregation could meet?

## THE ICEBERG THEORY

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**JACQUES COUSTEAU IS RENOWNED** for producing and presenting a long-running television series about the natural world. He has also been a campaigner for conservation, especially of our ocean life. I recall one stunning programme in which he and some of his colleagues were exploring icebergs. These are not, as I had assumed, mountainous lumps of solid ice. They often have holes in them. Cousteau swam and took pictures deep inside the honeycombed caverns of an iceberg, a mysterious and beautiful world where human beings had never explored.

We are all familiar with the fact that what we see of an iceberg is only a fraction of the totality. There is much more, hidden below the water-line. This makes a useful analogy for a typical congregation, providing a psychological perspective on what a congregation may be like.





Let's look first at what is clearly visible, the part that shows above the water.

There are the people, all sorts of people (we hope) of all ages and types, working and worshipping together. There are also the buildings, all, we hope, in good condition, attractive and well-cared for. Then there are other things like notice-boards and the magazine, the activities and events, meetings and discussions. We can look at all of these and draw some conclusions as to the health and well-being of that congregation. Our conclusions can be based on what is apparent, tangible and perhaps even measurable.

Now let's go below the water-line and explore what is concealed. There is much more than one might think. There is always more to human beings than meets the eye. There are the traditions, customs, habits and the way things are done. There are habits and conventions, even sometimes taboos which the active members will know about and probably take for granted.

There are also stories, often based on experiences from the past, such as reminiscences of previous ministers or prominent lay people. Some of the stories may be of happy, even glorious occasions. Or they may be the opposite, like sad, or even bad memories of tragedies, conflicts or mistakes. Many, I might even dare to say most congregations have 'skeletons in the cupboard', things some folk may know about but don't talk about.

Or there is often a body of knowledge present in a congregation, stories that are told or memories recounted, that accumulate into recollections of a 'golden age', when the place was thriving. It was, perhaps, the centre of the community, with an enormous Sunday school, a saintly minister and a vast congregation. A favourite claim of such golden eras is of the time 'when we had to put chairs down the aisle, extra seating to get everyone in'!

This layer of stored up material, good or bad, constitutes an important part of the life and the culture of a congregation. Long-standing members will know a lot about it, but newcomers, if they are allowed, will have to learn it.

For the health and development of a congregation, the more of this that can be brought into the open, the better. No organisation can thrive if there are 'hidden agendas', that only certain people are privy to. Nor can things go well if there is frequent, unfavourable comparing of the present day with a so-called 'golden age'. Was it all really so perfect?

If there is a climate of trustful openness, then most of this hidden or half-hidden material can be brought into the healthy light of day and dealt with, sensitively and carefully. So much the better if it is.

Then there is a deeper layer. Borrowing a concept from the psychological theories of Carl Gustav Jung, we can call this deeper layer the unconscious. It consists of all the things that we think and feel as human beings, which are very much part of us, but of which we are unaware. We all have such a layer, as individuals. It is a sort of substratum or undercurrent of buried experience and emotion, that influences what we are as people and what we do, especially in relation to others. The important thing about this unconscious layer is that it is so deeply buried, and has been for so long, that we are no longer aware that it is there, or of what it consists.

Congregations have this sort of unconscious level too. Many people reading this will begin to feel apprehensive. The idea that in order to work well as a congregation we must sometimes explore the deep, dark unconscious minds of people will put many folk right off. You may have already stopped reading and moved to another chapter. I hope not. Try to stay with me. It need not be a gloomy or fearful matter. This is because an important thing about the unconscious is

that it is ambiguous. It contains both the dark and the light. As well as being a store of hidden feelings, it is also the source of our potential.

As I see it, and putting the matter simply, there are in the unconscious two main sorts of material. There is fear and there is creativity, probably in roughly equal measure. Both of these will influence who and what we are as individuals and as congregations. Just as with the consciously hidden material described above, if we can carefully and sensitively bring the unconscious material to the surface, so much the better. The fearful material can be dissipated, and the creativity can be harnessed and used to everyone's benefit.

How can we bring unconscious material out into the light if we do not even know it is there? We can do it by being attentive to moods or climates that prevail in congregations. Also, we can listen to the reactions of outsiders - visitors, who can perhaps sense the prevailing mood or culture of a congregation. When congregations have undertaken the study-course called *The Manual of Congregational Self-Development*, it has been found to be most beneficial when led by an outsider.

The fear that lies deep in congregations is not hard to discern. It most frequently becomes apparent when change is proposed or is taking place. The deep anxiety is that if we change things, the world will suddenly feel like a dangerously insecure place. The more people are seen to cling to the past and the present, with a strained resistance to talking about the future, then we can perceive that there is a strong layer or undercurrent of fear.

On the other hand there is great potential for creativity in individuals and congregations. Part of the great challenge and delight of doing development work is to become aware of the creativity that is there, and to find ways to release it and harness it. There is tremendous joy and satisfaction to see someone emerging and revealing their creative talents, sharing them so that all may benefit. Likewise, when a

hitherto small, struggling, low-spirited congregation begins to do things it would never have dreamed of not long ago, again the joy in this can be an inspiration. This kind of experience is arguably one of the deepest satisfactions of being a member of a growing congregation.

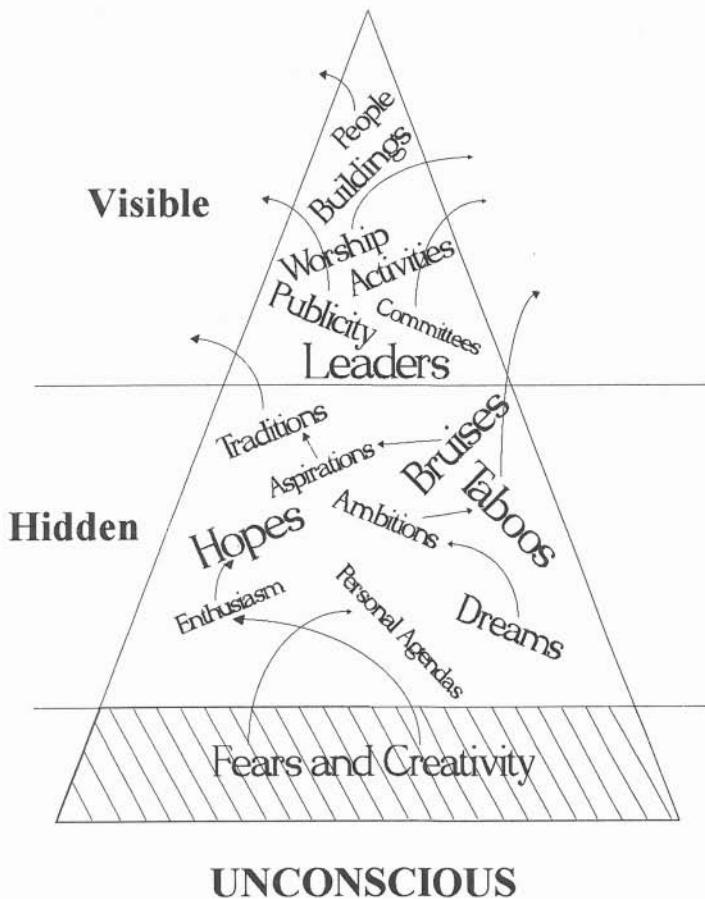
In one important sense, the image of the iceberg is *unhelpful*. Sure enough, it conveys the awareness that there is more, hidden below the surface. However, an iceberg is a cold, still, frozen thing. Human beings are not frozen. The interplay between their fears and their creativity is dynamic, organic, living and ambivalent. Fear and creativity are twins.

We all need to be psychologists. In our congregations, we need a prevailing climate in which there is trust and security enough for people to explore themselves and their community, and bring out into the light of day as much as they are able, to deal with, to use and to share.

We need all that we have of one another, the whole iceberg, not simply what is on the surface, but all the layers of the visible, hidden and unconscious parts of our whole person, our whole congregation.

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

Do you think that there are matters to do with the life of your congregation that presently are not being talked about? Are there any that you might dare to raise to the surface?



## WHAT DO YOU WANT TO GROW?

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**GROWTH CAN MEAN** more than one thing. There is growth in quality as well as quantity. In congregations quality attracts quantity, not the other way round.

When we are thinking about growth in quantity, we need to be clear about what we desire (and to be sure as to whether we really desire it...).

'We need more people' - is the frequent cry. A number of questions arise from that statement. Firstly, and perhaps most difficult, is to imagine what it would actually be like if suddenly large numbers started to come along. What would you do, and how would you cope?

Also, we need to consider what sort of people we want and what we want them to do.

Here we have a selection of options, each meriting some thought. If we want numerical growth, what are we talking about?

- larger attendances at Sunday services?
- more people to actually become members?
- more *subscribing* members?
- more *active* members?

Each of these categories implies different things.

If we want larger *attendance* figures at Sunday services, two basic factors apply:

1. reaching out to new people
2. increased frequency of attendance at services of those already coming

Both of these are needed. So, thought needs to be given to the factors that attract newcomers and the factors that will increase attendance by already established members. It is worth thinking about these separately at first and then linking them together. It is hard for newcomers to feel good about attending if the already established members don't attend often. They will wonder why.

What would encourage present members to attend more frequently?

What attracts newcomers?

It is useful to look at the membership/attendance ratio: e.g. 50 members, and an average attendance 16 gives a 'sixteen over fifty' ratio.

If we want an increase in the number of people who actually become *members*, this is a different exercise. Some folk are happy to attend a church without becoming members, just as they are happy to go to a concert or a theatre without becoming a member of the theatre company or even a 'friend' of the orchestra or drama society. Plenty of people attend parish churches without ever becoming members (i.e. going on the parish register). Some regular members of the congregation may resent this. If they do, and it shows, then such attenders will drift away.

This may explain why some folk only attend special services, like harvest or Christmas. They may be the only occasions when it is safe to do so without the danger of being pounced on by someone wanting to make them a member!

To be open and accepting of those who simply want to be attenders without getting involved may mean having a congregation where not everyone knows everyone.

How do you feel about that?

So do we want an increase in numbers of *members*, so that the membership list grows bigger? A first question to arise from this is to ask ourselves *why* we want people to become members? There may be good reasons for wanting it, there may be bad reasons. If there are any ulterior motives, perceptive visitors will spot them and take evasive action. This may explain why some people never come, or do not stay. They fear being pressed to become involved, committed, hard-working, burden-carrying members, or made to feel guilty if they don't.

If the present working members clearly enjoy what they do, work together cheerfully, find that making their contribution is a rewarding experience, delight in team-work and the community spirit, then others may well want to be part of that too.



Sam says...



*Attract by example rather than manipulation.*

Are we seeking people to make financial input, in order to ease the financial problems? Visitors may well be wary of the financial side of church-going. 'They are only after my money!' It is important that as soon as someone shows a real interest in membership, ways are found to explain, clearly and in a relaxed and non-threatening manner, what the financial responsibilities are. A good clear leaflet will help, such as *Ways of Supporting this Congregation Financially*, or a treasurer or someone able to hold a friendly and helpful conversation about this matter, will enable people to understand, and make their responsible contribution.

If we want people to become active members - 'workers' - let's be open to possibilities. Some folk need merely to be asked. They are the types who want to be involved, enjoy decision-making and carrying responsibility. They much prefer to be at the centre of operations rather than simply be a member.

Others may not feel that way. If they are already busy people, or not particularly organisation-minded, or quiet, shy folks, or have other reasons for not getting busily involved, it is a mistake to pressurise.

I have met congregations that give the clear impression that they want new people to come in so that they can quickly off-load work that they have become weary with doing. They even suggest that that is actually why they want new members. It will surely be self-defeating, either in the short run or the long run, to convey the impression that new members are wanted to solve the problems of the present members. That is *not* what new members come for.

So, there are various kinds of involvement for people, and different numbers to watch out for.

#### **Significant activity**

The studies suggest that if a congregation wants to start somewhere, the number to focus on first is the Sunday attendance figure. Sunday worship is the heart of the life of a congregation. This is where the most significant activity takes place, and if there is to be an overall growth in a congregation, it will begin with and flow from attendance at worship.

#### **Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

When you find yourself thinking that you want your congregation to grow, do you consider *why* you want growth? When you consider attracting new members, what do you think their purpose is?

## YOUR CONGREGATION'S IMAGE

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**A CONGREGATION PRESENTS** an image. It's worth thinking about the image your congregation presents. One writer reckons there are four possibilities: Servant, Prophet, Pilgrim or Survivor.

An active Salvation Army citadel would look like a servant type.

A Quaker meeting house with large posters about world peace might look like a prophet.

A busy, attractive, inviting church that looks as though it is going places might look like a pilgrim.

Oh, dear, some have the image of *survivor*. Passers-by might look and think, 'Well, I see that place is hanging on all these years. I'm glad it's still there, and I expect it pleases those that want to attend. But I wouldn't go there myself.'

The way to shake off that 'merely surviving' image is to ensure that the congregation:

- has something to offer to people. The notice-board and magazine will reveal that.
- has a point of view about the state of the world and wants to change things for the better. The worship, the *Wayside Pulpit*, the magazine and available publicity literature will reveal that.
- looks as though it is working for the future, not simply hanging on loyally to the past. The worship will reveal that, as will 'future planning', if it is on the agenda.

Sam says...



*You may never get a second chance to give a good first impression*

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

What sort of image does *your* church present? Can you consider what your congregation, in every respect, looks like to a complete newcomer? Are there areas of neglect to which you have simply become accustomed?

## RE-INVENT YOUR CONGREGATION

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**THIS IS ALL TO DO** with how we view the past, present and future. Some congregations feel that they are bound by and managed by the past. They inherited the congregation, its property and way of doing things and they believe that their task is to keep it going the way it has always gone, even when things are in sad decline.

Another view is to say, 'We do not have to be what the past has made us. We can take our destiny into our hands and by thinking things through, we can re-invent this congregation.'

It is not a sin or a crime to want to do this. We have just as much right to change things for the better and establish new ways of doing things as our forebears did years ago.

### **Tradition**

It is perhaps worth trying to unravel the thought that was expressed by a German poet, which translates thus:

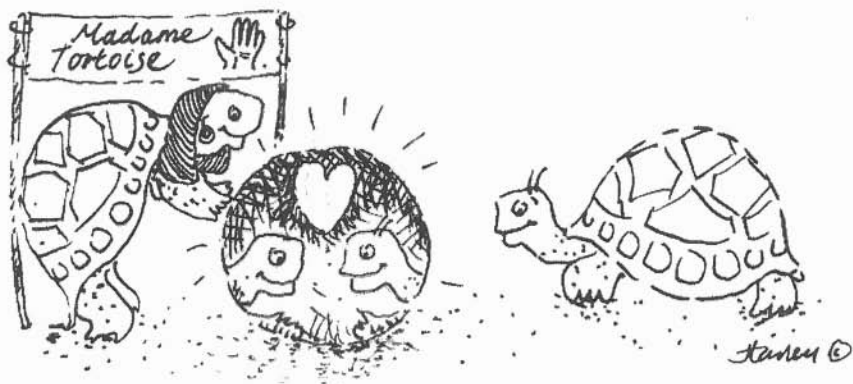
*If we do as our forebears did, we do not do as our forebears did.*

Some people attend their church with a view to maintaining the *status quo*. This is not necessarily wrong. There are patterns worth continuing.

Others turn up at church with hopes, dreams and plans in mind to change things for the better, to promote new life and creativity.

Let's consider all possibilities, and then make our choices. Honour the past, appraise the present, then climb into the driving seat and steer towards a newly invented future.

Sam says...



*The future isn't what it used to be.*

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

Who do you regard as the decision-makers in your congregation? Is your congregation 'tradition-bound' or 'future oriented'?

## AFRAID TO GROW?

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**A SECRET FEAR LURKS** in some congregations, preventing them from starting to develop and grow. The fear is that it might succeed! 'Supposing we try it and it works!'

Why should congregations be afraid to grow? It is because growth will surely bring change, so it can feel like travelling in a strange world into an unknown future.

Some anxieties are about small (yet significant) things. 'Somebody might sit in *my* pew, or park their car where I usually put mine.' Others are bigger matters, like the fact that bigger congregations cost more to run.

Also, you may look around on Sunday, and see people you don't know, and who don't know you. The minister may be too busy with newcomers to speak to you. You may see in the magazine names of people on the committee, or officers of the congregation and discover that these are people you hardly know!

Most of our congregations have a long way to go before reaching that point. It is in congregations with average attendances of seventy or more where it is hard to know and remember everyone's name. But it is happening. There are congregations where this growth is occurring, and the necessary adjustments are being made.

Also, in bigger congregations there is more work. For example, managing the finances gets more complex. Growing congregations often need two or more treasurers. Or the production and distribution

of an effective magazine, so that everyone knows what's going on, becomes quite an exercise!

Another anxiety is that newcomers, stepping boldly where, in the past, angels have feared to tread, might ask questions or even criticise the way things are done (because they don't know any better - or perhaps because they do!). Here again, adjustments have to be made.

Also, as congregations grow larger, expectations tend to grow higher. These may be about the quality of the sermon, the readability of the magazine, the efficiency of the officers or the general appearance of the buildings, who know what?

A further factor which often surprises people is the fact that if your congregations is growing, it tends to cost you more. There is a widespread view that says, 'We want more people, to share the burden of the expense of running this place!' This *might* be a true perspective. It is also true that to have more people doing more things more often increases the costs of it all. It is a common experience to find that with more going on, active participants are paying out more often for more activities or items, or for *better quality* events or items. With more frequent or longer-lasting events, overheads increase. All in all, it tends to cost you more.

**Value**

Somewhere along the way, there needs to be an opportunity to contemplate how much you value your church and its activities.

So, to grow could mean replacing one set of problems with another. It could mean that the present congregation has to make quite considerable adaptations to a new situation. Growing congregations need to be patient with themselves. The more they talk together



about what they are doing, and how and why they are doing it, the better.

Ask yourself whether the changes that growth will bring are worth it. And are they really *problems*?

Then you might like to ask congregations that have grown whether they would ever go back to being small. Very few would.

Sam says..



*We need more congregations interested in success and fewer that are pre-occupied with problems.*

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

What have been the three most successful factors in your congregation's life in the last year? How do you measure success? Do you report and celebrate successes?

## WINSOME OR LOSE SOME?

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**A WOMAN DECIDED** to try a church. She walked up the steps at a quarter to eleven and opened the door. There was no-one there. Not a soul. She hovered, looked around, browsed at the literature table. At nine minutes to eleven an organist appeared and started to play. At five to eleven someone else came, and during the last four minutes before eleven, the rest of the congregation arrived, timing it to the last second. Afterwards, she muttered a thank-you and left.

Next week she tried another church. She opened the door and the first thing she saw was a colourful poster, obviously drawn by children. It had flowers, a yellow sun with a smiling face on it, and the words 'Welcome to Our Church'. A steward, wearing a clear name-badge, handed her a hymn-book, smiled and said, 'Hello, Good morning, is this your first time here?'

'Yes.'

'I'm Henry, let me show you to a seat. You can sit anywhere really. Will this pew be all right? The service is simple and straight-forward. The minister will announce everything. We have coffee after service, you're welcome to join us. All right?'

'Fine, thank-you.'

She's a regular attender now. So is her family, and some friends.

That story is about the kind of welcome that people might get when they decide to try a church. The lessons to be learned are clear

enough. That first visit and the signals that are given out by a congregation can be crucial. The welcoming, the way that people feel as they come in and go out of a church, makes a deep and lasting impression. Let's look at this from a somewhat different perspective.

Have you ever considered how difficult it is to go to church? It is by no means the simple matter it may appear. For you, a churchgoer, it may come easily, as something natural you have quite possibly done all your life. For non-churchgoers (the majority these days) it takes courage to make that first visit. Many anxieties flow through the mind of a visitor. What will it be like? Who will be there? Will they stare at me? Will anyone speak to me? How will they be dressed? Do I take my coat off or leave it on? What will I have to do? Will I understand the service and know when to stand or sit? Will I know the hymns? Will I understand the sermon? Will I feel embarrassed by what is said? Will I stick out like a sore thumb? Can I take my children? Are there toilets? Can I get out and slip away unnoticed if I don't like it? Will anyone make me do or say something I don't want? Will I need any money?

All these thoughts, and probably others too, pre-occupy someone considering coming to your church for the first time. It is important, then, to do whatever you can to make that first visit comfortable.

Take a look at your building, the paths and steps, the doorways, the notice-boards, the way people are welcomed on arrival, the way the service proceeds and what happens when the service ends.

What can be done to make that first visit easier for a newcomer? In recent years we have become increasingly aware of the difficulties faced by handicapped people. Many of our congregations are looking at their building with this in mind. Sometimes this is a considerable exercise to attend to. Sometimes it needs only a few simple things, like small handrails on church steps, to be tremendously helpful.

### **Two heads are better**

Most congregations have a steward on duty at the door on Sunday morning. This is an important role, and merits thought and discussion. If there is a rota of stewards, it is a good idea for them to meet occasionally and compare notes and experiences. It might be an even better idea to have *two* people on duty as stewards each Sunday, say, a man and a woman. This will give the impression that good numbers are expected, and will ensure that no-one is missed because one steward is busy with someone else. Also, two stewards can be supportive of each other. This is true of many tasks in a congregation. Sam says... *Collaborate. Never do alone what you can do with someone else.*

Something else: stewards should remember to speak to children and young people as they come and go. They are often overlooked.

Having looked at that process whereby people come in and out (and the *out* is as important as the *in* - if folk are apprehensive that they might not be able to escape once they are in, they won't come in at all!) there are further stages to the welcome.

If there is a coffee time after the Sunday service, make sure that it is announced and that visitors are shown the way to the coffee gathering, and that someone talks to them. To leave a newcomer hovering unattended is sure to make for discomfort. *All* congregations regard themselves as friendly and welcoming, but it is not always as true as folk think. What they often mean is that they are friendly with one another, but not so good with visitors. It is almost as though they are saying, 'We are a friendly church. We are so busy being friendly with one another we don't have time to be friendly to newcomers.'

Then there is follow-up. It is a good idea to have a visitors book and to invite newcomers to sign it. It may help to have a column at the side saying, *Tick if you would like to receive our magazine.* This makes available, in a number of ways, a chance to follow up the visit. If there is an indication that the magazine would be welcomed, make sure that they get it. If you have other literature that would be helpful, send that too. If you don't have any such literature, think about creating some. If there is a special event coming up, a service or social event or something else, send information about that too.

In the send-outs, it could be good to include a card saying something like, 'Please tick and return this card if you would like to continue to receive literature, or would like someone to visit you.'

Follow-up visits require careful thought and would have to be very sensitively handled. Some visitors may welcome it, some may regard it as too intrusive or overbearing. There is a widespread dislike of over-earnest evangelizing, so the home visit is perhaps better left until the newcomer has attended a few times and shown some real interest or need.

The next stage is a process we had better call assimilation. This is what happens when a newcomer begins to attend and get involved. This is a crucial and important time. There are some dos and don'ts around this too. It is a topic that merits a chapter of its own.

For the moment, it is worth keeping in mind the three stages:

- attracting newcomers
- welcoming newcomers
- assimilating newcomers

All three stages require care and sensitivity, and should not be left simply to chance.

Sam says...



*It's a great art to be welcoming.*

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

Have another look at the imagined questions that might go through the head of a prospective visitor. Can you add to that list of thoughts? Can you answer each one satisfactorily? What changes are you prompted to make?

## THE ANSWER'S A MELON

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**SOMEONE ONCE DESCRIBED** a congregation as being like a melon. The best part, where all the ripeness, the enjoyable flavour, the juice and the vitamins are to be found, is in the centre. But to get to it, you have to penetrate a thick, tough skin.

Likewise in a congregation. Most if not all of the flavour, the enjoyment and satisfaction of belonging is in the centre, the inner core. Some congregations have a thick (though invisible) skin around the centre which newcomers find it difficult to penetrate. It consists of two things, one is the tradition, norms and customs ('the way we've always done things') and the other is the fact that those in the inner core know one another, and probably have done so for a long time.

Take a look at the inner core of your congregation. Does it have a thick skin?

Coming at this from another perspective, we might like to consider that some congregational development work can be done 'by numbers', a step by step approach.

**Step 1** is attracting or bringing newcomers to your congregation.

**Step 2** is ensuring that their welcome is warm, sensitive and good.

**Step 3** is enabling newcomers to become involved in the life of the congregation, feel that they really belong and have a contribution to make as well as some responsibilities.

Step 3 is often referred to as *assimilation*. Imagine someone saying, 'Well I went to a church for a few weeks, but I never really felt that I *belonged*. It was a bit of an in-group really.'

It is generally reckoned that there are four main ways in which people come into a church:

1. through family contacts
2. through friendship contacts
3. by getting to know the minister
4. by simply turning up and walking in

As for what enables someone to *stay* in membership of a congregation and become fully involved, there are generally reckoned to be four ways for this too:

1. They become involved with a small group within the church before they become members.
2. They become involved with a small group within the church after they become members.
3. They take on a position of some responsibility such as officer or committee member or helper with the children.
4. They join in with a task in the church, e.g. coffee making, flower arranging, stewarding, helping on a social occasion, helping with magazine, etc.



A major factor in the art of congregational development is to enable people not simply to be attracted and not simply to be welcomed (i.e. the process by which people come and go on a Sunday visit) *but also to be assimilated*.

For those who come into the church through family contacts, the three-part process of attraction, welcome and assimilation is comparatively easy. They instantly know some people and can join in activities without having to 'break the ice' of introducing themselves to strangers. A factor to keep in mind is that such people tend to think more about the *past* of the church than the present or future ('members of my family have been coming here for years').

For those who come into the church because they have been attracted by the minister, or by publicity for what the church stands for or does, the task of assimilation is harder. Their interest will largely be in the on-going work of the congregation, its ideas, values and activities, and what it is trying to achieve.

Those who have been attracted by the small groups within the church will primarily be interested in finding companionship, as well as an understanding of both the past and the present interests and activities of the church.

One of the most troubling factors in assimilating new members is what we may call the *us-them* syndrome. Often without realising it, congregations have an established core of long-standing members, and for them to be flexible enough to attract, welcome and assimilate newcomers can be difficult.

### **Successful adjustments**

Perhaps the most sensitive matter for regular churchgoers to face is the simple fact that if newcomers join their church, then that congregation is in some way going to *change*. New people bring new ideas, attitudes and habits and are not steeped in the old ways like the long-standing members. So, changes *will* happen and adjustments will have to be made. It is inevitable. The art is to make the adjustments comfortably and successfully.

The long-standing members tend to expect newcomers to accept, adopt and perpetuate the customs, traditions and value systems installed by them, perhaps years ago, possibly even by the pioneer founders of the congregation. Newcomers often feel they want to reject these older norms. The tension between these two may make either the old hands or the newcomers feel rejected.

The old hands will say they are looking for new members, preferably families to preserve the institution dear to their hearts. This is not what newcomers are looking for. They have come with their own needs and interests, not in order perpetuate 'someone else's' church.

One man, formerly a non-church-goer, described how he used to say, 'I'm going to an event at my wife's church.' Later he found himself saying, 'I'm going to something at *the* church.' 'I've reached the stage now,' he reported, 'where I'm proud to say that I'm going to an event at *my* church.'

Assimilation takes time. There are pitfalls to avoid in the process.

## DON'T

- gush over newcomers as though they were essential to save your ailing congregation.
- pounce on newcomers and thrust them into significant posts too quickly.
- allow a situation in which newcomers are asked to be workers while the old hands are the decision-makers.
- displace all the old hands with newcomers as there will then be a cluster of old hands not happy with 'the way this church is being run now'.
- continue to do everything in the way that has always been done without any discussion or planning, as newcomers will soon feel excluded. They will stand wondering what they can do, whilst the old hands simply get on with things 'in the usual way'. (Again, the importance of discussion cannot be overstressed.)

## DO

- encourage the use of name-badges. They encourage the use of names, especially first names; they say 'I am happy for you to know me', and they remove the embarrassment of having to ask.

### **An implied message**

Name-badges imply, 'We are a growing congregation, with newcomers, and we cannot assume everyone knows everyone. If you are new, please don't be anxious, you are probably not the only one.'

- make use of photographs. Have photo albums around; put pictures up on notice boards and in your magazine; a display board with the minister and the officers and other posts of responsibility, with a photo with each name, enables newcomers to get to know significant people very quickly.
- introduce people to people - frequently. It is better to duplicate introductions than to neglect them.
- announce forthcoming events with the words 'all welcome' or 'newcomers welcome' as appropriate. Every notice, leaflet, pamphlet etc. should have 'all welcome' on it.
- put some words of welcome to newcomers in your magazine. Mention names.
- invite offers of help, in writing, on 'sign-up sheets' on notice-boards. This gives newcomers a chance to participate (and old hands a chance to change their jobs if they feel like it!).
- hold an occasion, preferably a special service at least once per year, to welcome new people into membership. This not only helps new folk to feel that they truly belong, but also publicises that new members are welcome, and that there is a process whereby people can indicate their desire to join.
- keep an up-to-date name and address list, and circulate it to everyone. Publish amendments.
- appoint a membership secretary, someone who can explain the process of becoming a member, the benefits and responsibilities of membership.
- have available a leaflet that clearly explains membership.

**Time to learn**

It has been very pleasing to observe a growing trend among our congregations to arrange and carry out a series of talks with discussion under the heading *Introducing Unitarianism*. This gives an opportunity for new members to learn more about our history, our faith, our movement, and become assimilated into a congregation that way. It is the frequent experience of ministers and other leaders of such a course to find that long-standing members want to join in too!

Sam says....



*A good congregation can entertain itself, a visitor and a new idea.*

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

Draw a large circle to represent the whole of your congregation. Place a large dot in the centre of it, to represent the heart of the congregation, the inner core. Now place another (coloured) dot to represent yourself. How close to the inner core are you? Invite members of your discussion group to do the same? How do you feel about the position of your dot?

## JANET the FLOWER-ARRANGER - 1

### *A tragedy*

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**JANET BEGAN ATTENDING** a Unitarian church a few years ago. She had been looking for a church to belong to, and quite liked the Sunday services at this one.

After a few weeks, she was approached after the service one Sunday by an older member. 'I'm the Flower Secretary, for my sins,' she said. 'I wonder, would you do the flowers one week? I could put you down for a Sunday next month.'

'Oh!' said Janet, somewhat taken aback. 'I'm not much of a flower arranger, but if you need someone, I could give it a try.'

'Right,' said the Flower Secretary. 'I'll put you down for the 23rd. That's a relief, it's good to have another name for my list.'

'Er... when do I actually do them?' asked Janet.

'Oh, when you like really. Some folk come a bit early on Sunday and do it. Others like to come on Saturday morning. The caretaker will lend you a key to get in.'

'Oh, all right,' said Janet.

She wrote the date in her diary and wondered a lot about doing the flowers. 'What am I actually supposed to do?' she thought. She studied the flower arrangements in the church each week. Sometimes

one, sometimes several vases were filled. 'Am I supposed to bring my own vases?' she wondered. 'I'm not even sure where the tap is.'

When the time came, she set off for the local florist on Saturday morning. The flowers were not cheap. 'I wonder how much I'm supposed to spend?' she asked herself. 'And do I claim the money from somebody? Actually, I don't mind paying myself, but it could be a bit tough on anyone who can't afford it.'

She got the key from the caretaker and let herself into the church. She couldn't find the light switch, but fortunately she could see just about well enough. The flowers from the previous week were still in their place, so she decided to use the same vases. 'Do they always just get left to die like this?' she wondered 'Seems a bit of a waste.'

It felt strange, being in the church all by herself. To get water, she found her way to the kitchen and found a milk jug. It took five trips. 'I wonder if there's a tap anywhere nearer?' she thought.

The task took longer than she had thought, but the flowers looked quite good. The next problem was disposing of the bits. She searched for a rubbish bin, but couldn't find one, except a paper bin in the minister's vestry.

On Sunday morning she went nervously to church, wondering if anyone would say anything about her flowers. Were they all right? Were they enough? Had she put them in the right place? Were they up to standard?

She saw a number of folk on her way in, including the Flower Secretary, but no-one mentioned the flowers. When it came to the end of the notices during the service, the minister said, 'Oh, and lastly, will whoever it is keeps stuffing left-over rubbish from the



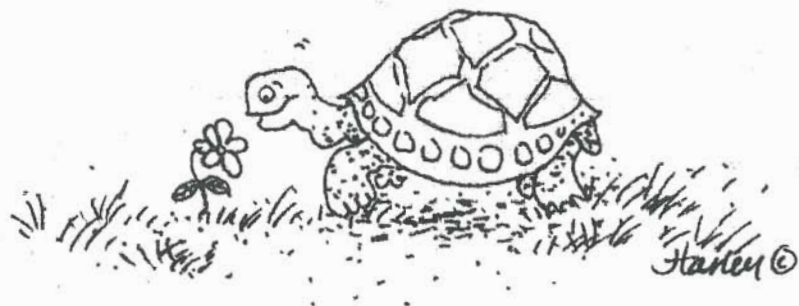
flower arranging in my bin in my vestry, please don't do it. I have mentioned this before.'

That was all Janet ever heard about the flowers that Sunday.

\* \* \*

'Whatever happened to that young woman that used to come. Can't remember her name. Dark hair, used to sit by herself near the back.'  
'Oh yes, haven't seen her for ages. She didn't last long. Typical of people these days. No sense of loyalty.'  
'Mmmm. She did the flowers one Sunday, I remember. Very nice, they were.'

Sam says...



*Little things mean a lot.*

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

Go through the story point by point. What was wrong? Why is this story called a tragedy? What does the Flower Secretary mean by 'For my sins'? How would you rewrite this story? (If you can't answer this last question, read the next chapter.)

## JANET the FLOWER ARRANGER - 2

### *A Romance*

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**JANET BEGAN ATTENDING** a Unitarian church a few years ago. She had been looking for a church to belong to, and quite liked the Sunday services at this one.

After a few weeks she was approached at coffee time one Sunday by an older member. 'Hello. I'm Maggie the Flower Secretary.' She pointed proudly to her name badge. It said, *Maggie the Flower Secretary*. 'I wonder if you would like to do the flowers in church one Sunday. It's a job we like to share. If you'd like to do it, we'd all be very grateful.'

'Oh!' said Janet, somewhat taken aback. 'I'm not much of a flower arranger, but if you need someone, I could give it a try.'

'Please don't be anxious,' said Maggie. 'None of us is an expert and we appreciate whatever people can do. Let's have a look at the list. Is there a particular Sunday you'd like to choose?'

'Not really,' said Janet, though come to think of it, the 23rd of next month is just a year since my grandmother died, but she wasn't a member here.'

'No matter,' said Maggie. 'Sounds fine. People often give flowers in memory of someone, or to celebrate an occasion. Can I put you down for that date?'

'Yes,' said Janet.

'Great,' said Maggie. 'You'll see your name in the list in the magazine, and I'll remind you nearer the time. There are a few things to explain.'

'Oh? You mean, like, when to come and do them?'

'Yes. Let's go and have a look around.'

They went into the church. Maggie said, 'There are several places to put flowers; the main table at the front, and several shelves and window sills. There are also some pedestals to bring in if you want. Feel free to put them wherever you choose.'

'Right,' said Janet.

Maggie led her to a room near the vestry. 'Here's the table to work on,' she said, 'though, if you prefer, you could do the arrangements at home and bring them ready done.'

'No, I expect I'll do it here,' said Janet.

'That's fine. The water tap is here in this alcove, and here's a jug. There are lots of vases and stands to choose from. Use whatever suits your flowers. And when you've finished, put the bits in the bin outside this door.'

'Now, something important,' she added. 'The best place to buy flowers is the stall on the local market. He's very helpful and reasonably priced. But the point is this. We have a flower fund. If you want to claim the costs of your flowers from the fund, please don't feel at all shy about doing so. He'll give you a receipt, let me have that, and I'll settle with you when I see you.'

'Well, no, I shan't, it's all right,' said Janet, but I'm glad there is a fund. Some folk might be put off taking a turn otherwise.'

'Exactly,' said Maggie. 'Now, about getting in. The caretaker has the key, but if you let me know when, I'll come with you. It's a bit strange being in here by yourself, especially the first time.'

'No really, I don't mind,' said Janet. 'I'll be all right.'

'Right then,' said Maggie. 'Everything I've told you I've written in this little leaflet. It's called *Guide-lines for Church Flower Arrangers*. And look, it's got my 'phone number. Any problems, just give me a ring.'

'You've gone to a lot of trouble,' said Janet.

'Not at all,' said Maggie. 'Nice flowers in church are important. And I hope you enjoy doing it.'

Janet spotted her name in the next magazine, and a few days before her turn, Maggie gave her a call. 'Just in case you needed a reminder,' she said.

Janet did all as Maggie and the *Guide-lines* leaflet said. She was engrossed in flower arranging when she heard someone coming into the church. It was Maggie. 'I remembered something I hadn't put in the *Guide-lines*,' she said. 'This job always takes longer than you think, so I've brought us some coffee. How are you getting on? Hey, those look very nice. I thought you said you weren't much of a flower arranger!'

They drank the coffee and chatted. 'How old was your Grandmother?' Maggie asked. She helped Janet carry the arrangements into the church.

On Sunday morning Janet wondered if anyone would say anything about her flowers. She felt pretty confident. Maggie had seemed satisfied.

When it came to the end of the notices during the service, the Minister said, 'Are there any other announcements?'

Maggie stood up. 'A couple of us are going to see Gladys Brown this afternoon in Sunnyvale Nursing Home. She misses coming to church, so we'll take her some of those lovely flowers Janet has done for us this morning. She'll be pleased to see us and get a lot of pleasure from the flowers - that is unless Janet wants to take them. They are in memory of her grandmother.'

Janet shook her head. 'No, no,' she said, 'Please take them.'

'Good,' said the Minister. 'Thank you Janet. And Maggie, do give Gladys all our love.'

After the service, the Minister came up to Janet. 'Maggie was right about your flowers. You must have a flair for flower-arranging.' Maggie added, 'I hope you'll do it again some time. At Christmas, a gang of us get together and do some special decorations. You're welcome to join us.'

'Yes, thanks,' said Janet.

On the way home, she found herself looking in a bookshop window. There were several books on flower arranging.

\* \* \*

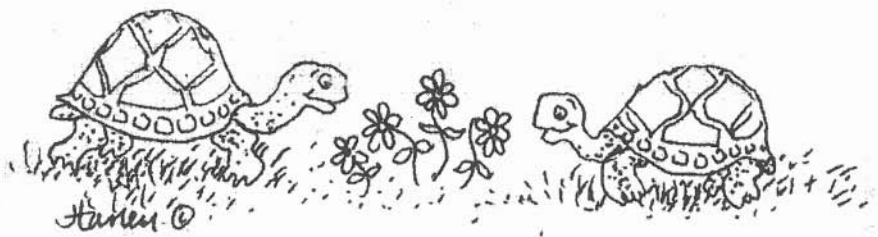
*Notice in the church magazine, a year later.*

On Thursday 10th there will be a meeting of the flower arrangers group. This group meets a few times each year and is open to anyone.

We discuss ideas for flower arranging, organise the rota and make plans for any special services or events. This meeting will discuss the proposed Flower Festival to be held here next year. Newcomers are especially welcome. Refreshments.

Signed, *Janet the Flower Secretary*

Sam says...



*Little things can lead to greater things.*

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

What does this story tell you about the climate, atmosphere or culture of this congregation? How does your congregation compare?

## The PARTS and The WHOLE

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**A QUESTION THAT MAY BE ASKED** about a congregation is this: How do the parts relate to the whole and to one another?

It may strike you as a strange question. What does it mean?

It is worth looking at the congregation as a whole and then looking at the parts within it. One way to do this is to draw a large circle on a sheet of paper, and then put a number of small circles inside it. The large circle represents the whole congregation, everyone and every group that is in some way connected with the congregation. The small circles represent the groups within the whole congregation.

For example, you may have a small circle representing the regular core of Sunday attenders, another for the Women's League, a circle representing the committee, one for the trustees, another for the play group, the Sunday school and so on until you have every group, society, organisation or whatever, represented by these small circles.

Now, try discussing the question posed at the beginning: How do the parts relate to one another and to the whole? Draw lines to link the circles. Thick lines where the relationship is strong, thin lines where it is weak, and zigzagged lines where there is conflict!

The point of the discussion is the belief that if all the parts relate well to one another, and feel part of the whole, that congregation will be harmonious in spirit, and will develop and grow. If there is disharmony, weak relationships or conflictual relationships, that congregation will find it hard to grow.

### **Love to hate**

It is a mistake to assume that where there is conflict there is no relationship. Conflictual relationships can be very strong. Some married couples argue all the time, and it would be risky to try to separate them. There are some folk in a congregation who complain about everything all the time. They need careful handling. There are those who believe that a meeting such as a committee meeting is something you attend in order to have an argument, and feel cheated if this doesn't occur. They too need careful handling, and a good sense of humour is a great asset at this point. Congregations in which a conflictual style prevails can be very off-putting to newcomers, and are unlikely to grow.

In the sample diagram that follows, certain healthy features of this imaginary congregation can be seen, and certain unhealthy ones too.

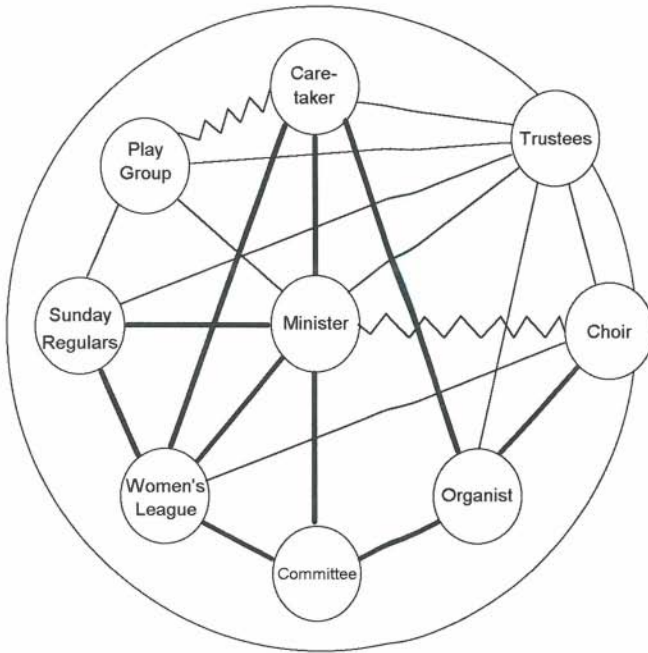
Note that the small circle representing the choir actually goes outside the main circle. This is to indicate, as someone put it, 'Some choir members are not part of the congregation. They only come because they like a good sing!'

Notice also that the line between the trustees and the regular attenders is very thin. This is because some of the trustees are not even members, don't attend services and don't even know many of the active members.

The zigzag, by the way, is between the play group and the caretaker! Any ideas why? Any thoughts on how that zigzag could be changed to a thick, strong line? And what's happened to the relationship between the minister and the choir?



## Blanktown Unitarian Church



Having let your imagination run over this sample, try drawing one for your own congregation. Do it in a group and compare responses. It is your ideas, as they arise in your discussion, that will provide interesting ways forward for your congregation. How can the relations between the various groups be improved? And how can all the parts feel that they belong to the whole?

It will probably emerge that *one* crucial factor in promoting harmony and strengthening relationships is the magazine. A well thought out magazine can inform people of what is going on in the various groups, can invite people from one group activity to another, name the officers or people in significant posts, share good news and affirm the contribution each group makes to the whole.

Sam says...



*You do not all have to sound the same, but you can be harmonious.*

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

Draw a large circle like the one above to represent your congregation, and all the small circles within it. Add the thick lines, thin lines and zigzagged lines as appropriate. How do you feel about the overall relationships between the parts and the whole?

Are there people or groups in your congregation that you don't know? Can anything be done about that? Does an 'atmosphere of complaint' prevail... ever? Is anyone excluded?

## ON BEING BUSINESS-LIKE

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*Our forebears have given us a tradition of open speaking and respect for differences of opinion which in my view is the most precious single inheritance that we have. There is no way in which a vision of the future can be developed among a group of people unless those people have a very high degree of mutuality of respect, tolerance, and above all humour. It is of course a great advantage if the organisation starts, so to speak, with this in place, and in our case I believe our scientific heritage and background lead naturally to a wish to hear, dissect and learn from others' views. However, plain speaking and tolerance are tender flowers which have to be nurtured and helped to grow. Shortness of response, or a snappy turn-off of views you don't like, causes infinite harm....It has to be possible to dream and speak the unthinkable, for the only thing that we do know is that we shall not know what tomorrow's world will be like. It will have changed more than even the most outrageous thinking is likely to encompass.*

**CAN YOU GUESS** where that quotation comes from? It sounds like one of the great Unitarian writers of the past, doesn't it? Someone interested in people, and willing to take them seriously and respect their views. It is someone with a sense of heritage, and the reference to science could mean Joseph Priestley. This writer has an enthusiasm for the future too, willing to dream impossible dreams, a hopeful person.

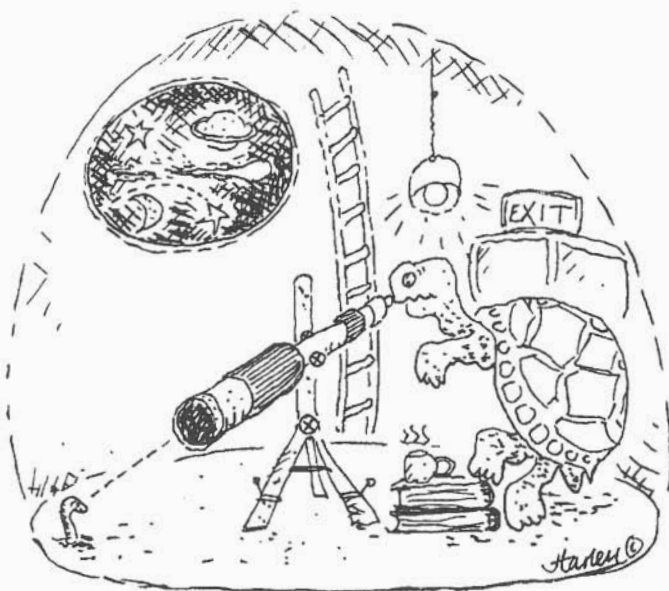
But no, this is not a great religious teacher or Unitarian preacher. He is quoted because we need to be reminded of these thoughts from time to time and be willing to learn from unexpected sources. It is not

someone involved in promoting the development and growth of Unitarian congregations, though it would be good to have him as a member of one, especially if this is how his mind works.

Not a preacher nor religious teacher, philosopher, theologian or religious educator. Have one more guess? It is John Harvey-Jones, former managing-director of ICI, and well known TV presenter and business management consultant.

So here's a developmental thought. If people in business are willing to run their companies on principles quoted above, perhaps churches should be willing to learn from those who run businesses. Is that a heretical thought?

Sam says,



*Any organisation that loses sight of its goals goes out of business.*

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

How do you react to the words 'business', 'management', 'leadership', 'efficiency'? How efficiently run is your congregation? What are the main areas with room for improvement?

## ENJOYING YOUR AGM

---

**I RECALL THE TIME** I conducted a service during which someone read out the notices. 'Next Sunday brings the Annual General Meeting of the congregation,' he said. 'Now I know that AGMs are not everyone's cup of tea,' he added apologetically, 'but I hope everyone will make the effort to come.'

'Mmm,' I thought to myself.

Travelling home I pondered further. What's wrong with AGMs that people have to be implored to attend, despite their negative feelings? Are AGMs such a tiresome chore?

Many people dislike all sorts of committees or business meetings. They are seen as boring or misery-making experiences. I wonder why? Is it inevitable? Can congregations be helped to view their committees and AGMs differently?

Often it is just a bad habit. People speak disparagingly of such meetings, saying negative things before they realise that the words have come out of their mouth.

Or there is fear that if someone attends an AGM they will be asked to do something they don't want to take on and will perhaps feel guilty about it.

Or there are meetings which betray the tediousness of doing the same old thing, with no joy or sense of achievement. Congregational development can help with all these feelings.

Bad habits can be cured. Every time you hear the thoughtless negative feeling expressed, counter it with something optimistic! And it ought to be possible for people to take on jobs willingly, and relinquish them when the right time comes to do so. Tediousness and joylessness can be chased away too.

I once tried an experiment. I went to an AGM of one of our congregations. Opening the meeting, the chairperson drew attention to the long agenda, and asked if there were any other items to go on it. I put up my hand.

'I've brought a couple of bottles of sherry and some glasses,' I said. 'It seems to me that this congregation has achieved a tremendous amount during the last year. I think we should celebrate all that has been done!'

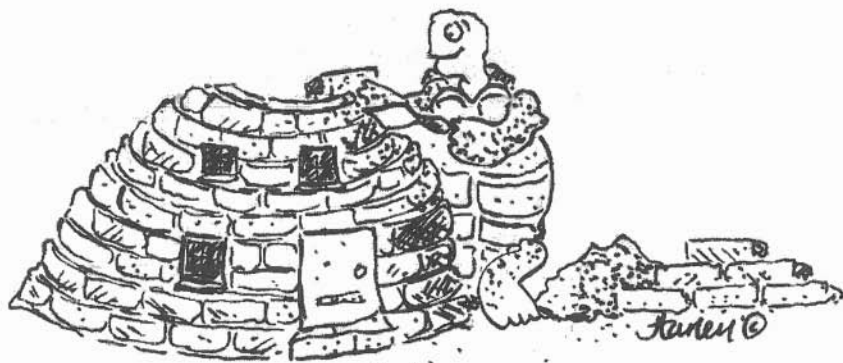
There were raised eyebrows all around the room. Then, after a moment, there came nods and smiles of agreement from everyone. The experiment had worked. We had a very good AGM. There were affirmations of all the good things that had been done, and 'thank-you' was said to almost every member of the congregation for the contribution they had made.

There was also a change made to the structure of the committee when the treasurer's job was divided into two because of the increasing work-load. Then a decision was made by the congregation to set themselves to raise money for a building extension, probably the most ambitious project in the whole history of this small congregation.

I said very little during the meeting. I enjoyed listening, and when it had ended I passed round the glasses of sherry. We stood in a circle and looked at one another. 'Here's to the end of a successful year. And here's to another good year ahead. Cheers!'

Let's encourage congregations to enjoy their AGM. It can be done. Use a glass of sherry if that will help, or make it a full-blown congregational party if you can. Counter any negative thoughts you may hear, and by all means affirm your achievements. Thank people for what they have done, and as well as reviewing the past, plan positively for the year ahead. AGMs should be a time for purposeful celebration.

Sam says...



*Affirm your achievements, then build on them.*

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

How do you feel about your congregation's AGM? Is it a tiresome chore to be got through? Can that feeling be eliminated? Can your AGM be turned into a celebration? Can you make a list of the achievements of the past year?



## A MOST UNUSUAL SERMON

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**IN MY ADDRESS THIS MORNING**, I want to talk about something that I think is rarely if ever mentioned in sermons, and yet is highly relevant to this congregation and appropriate for our consideration. I'm going to tell you about the church committee meeting that was held last week.

Some of the committee members are in the congregation today. In fact it would be a good idea if they were to stand up for a moment so that we can be reminded who they are. Their last meeting lasted two and a half hours. They work hard on our behalf.

We begin our meetings with an opening thought or prayer, to remind ourselves who we are and what our purpose is. We take it in turns to lead this.

We then check who is present and who is absent, and find out why. We hope that committee members will remain interested and committed to the work for the whole year.

Next we have a look at the minutes of our previous meeting, to check up on what matters are to be carried forward into this meeting, and who is supposed to have done what since we last met. We have an 'action' column next to each item that contains a decision we have made. This tells us who is expected to have done what. We try to be efficient and do things well. If this sounds a bit officious, don't worry. It is not meant to be. It's just that we've come to believe that although a congregation is not a business, it is a virtue to be business-like. What we do matters, so we try to do things well.

We then hear the Minister's Report, an overview of what our minister has been involved in. This consists of a review of Sunday services, and feed-back comment is invited. Then we hear of pastoral care concerns, news of members, especially the sick or house-bound. To this the Minister adds mention of other involvements and activities, and these are discussed as far as we want to. This is because we want committee and Minister to work in partnership, know what we are all doing, keep the information and interest flowing, see where we can be of support to one another.

Next comes a review of past events. Anything that has happened: social events, fundraising, visits, meetings, work-parties or other activities; these are reported on and discussed, to ensure that all has gone well, and see what lessons can be learned. We try to learn from our successes and failures alike. We also try to remember to thank anyone who has taken on any special responsibility or done anything that deserves a special mention.

Then come future events: what's on the programme, what needs to be done, who needs to organise what, whom can we recruit to help with the planning and carrying out of our activities. Planning and preparation is important. We also try to involve other members of the congregation, so that the maximum number of people have a part to play in all that we do.

Next we have a finance report. Our treasurer keeps us as up to date as possible about income and expenditure, reports any good news or bad news or anything else we ought to know. The careful management of your money, getting it in satisfactorily, and spending it creatively is a high priority.

We then have a report on our buildings. All property needs to be kept in good repair. The condition and appearance and usefulness of our buildings is very important, involving a lot of work from our caretakers and volunteers, as well as a lot of expenditure.

We then hear from the Women's League representative, to keep us up to date with their activities, and from the crèche and children's group leaders, to keep us up to date with what the children are doing.

Then we may get some news of our District Association's activities, or General Assembly matters, like the forthcoming GA Annual Meetings. All these matters are discussed as openly and carefully as we can, to ensure that the life and work of the congregation goes well.

We also have a 'future planning' slot. We try to ensure that our committee meetings are not simply managing the routine things of a day-to-day kind, but also planning for the future development and well-being of the congregation. We try to ensure that what we hand on to the future is good.

Sometimes difficulties arise, of course. Hard discussions, strong opinions, disagreements too. But we usually manage to come either to an agreement or perhaps a compromise. We do not often take a vote in such a way as to divide the committee and send some people home winners and some losers. Almost always we manage to reach a working consensus that enables us to move forward satisfactorily for all concerned. We prefer to work that way.

So, that is an outline of procedure at our last committee meeting, a fairly typical committee agenda. Our congregation is run democratically. The committee consists of the officers and members that *you* elected at the Annual Meeting of the congregation, and they meet month by month to manage the affairs of this congregation as effectively as they can. Our meetings are usually very good. We work hard, and are glad of a cup of tea break along the way.

Members of the congregation volunteer to work for us, as officers or committee, because they believe in this congregation, what it stands for, what it offers and gives to its members and the community. They

want to make their contribution to ensuring that all goes well. The process whereby we work is as democratic as we can make it; we try for fairness and justice and a balance of all the different interests involved.

This is an opportunity for me to thank the officers and committee for their work during this last year. We've had a good year, a lot has been achieved and a lot of good things are in hand for the future. The congregation is in good heart, good shape and good spirits.

A committee meeting might sound, on first hearing, like boring administration. Committees do have a bad reputation for that. I think that's a pity. There is no reason why committee meetings, if they are well thought out and carefully prepared, should be boring. The planning of exciting and satisfying activities for our future can be challenging and give us something to look forward to. Appraising what we have done, celebrating achievements and learning from all we do, can be satisfying too if it is done in a positive way.

And those of us who believe in our congregation, and want to make it a satisfying and harmonious spiritual home for ourselves and for newcomers who might enter our doors, believe and indeed know that being caring and attentive to everything, little things as well as major events, is important.

The purpose of this address is to bring out into the open and share with everybody what happens at our committee meetings. This is being done for a number of reasons. It is a way of publicly thanking those who work for our congregation in this way. It is a way of telling everyone that we are a democratic organisation - we believe in democracy and try to practise it. The government of this congregation is not undertaken by some remote authority. It is us, managing our own affairs as well as we can. It is also a way of reminding ourselves that different people contribute to the life of a church in various ways - some in very obvious and public activities, others quietly getting on

with important jobs that are less noticeable. We are a voluntary organisation. We depend upon the generous giving of the time and talents of people, as well as money.

And this is also a way of making it clear to everyone that there is opportunity for all to join in and help with the work of our church in whatever way they feel they can. At the next Annual Meeting, there will be a chance for you to put your name forward as someone interested in serving on the committee, or taking on a task or responsibility of some sort if you wish. It's up to you.

This sermon may sound unusual. It may sound as though it is about practical work and administration. In a sense, so it is.

But it is also a way of affirming that we believe in people: what they can give, what they can do together. We believe in team-work; being supportive; listening; giving; appreciating; valuing; participation; taking responsibility; being caring, patient, sensitive and careful.

Even our practical work, even our administration, is underpinned by our spiritual values.

We have faith in ourselves and the contribution we can make; we have hope for our future, and what this congregation can become for the next generation; and we have love, expressed in a caring community.

And all of this in a committee meeting!

Amen.

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

Could everyone or at least most people in your congregation name the members of your committee? Or the trustees? How highly would you rate the quality of democracy in your congregation?

## VOLUNTEERS! O VOLUNTEERS!

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**A CONGREGATION** is a voluntary organisation. It is not a commercial enterprise or a business, nor is it a governmental agency like a hospital, nor does it have share-holders or even 'owners' in the conventional sense. A congregation is a group of people that come together for a purpose, and come voluntarily. The members are more like stewards, that have responsibility for a period and then hand on that responsibility at the appropriate time. Some people are paid for what they do in a church: ministers, organists and some others. But that does not diminish the fact that it is a voluntary organisation.

In this present age, when church-going is a minority activity, and when the social pressure to go to church as the respectable thing to do has almost completely waned, then the church is even more a voluntary organisation than perhaps it was. Added to all of this, we operate our churches on the congregational system, with each church self-governing (no bishops or central office to tell us what we may or may not do) and the voluntary nature becomes even more apparent. I have often drawn three faces on my flip chart to illustrate the common reactions to the idea of a voluntary organisation.

The first face has a smile on it.

This portrays the person who is glad that we are a voluntary organisation, and appreciates with joy the knowledge that when people join a church, become supportive and active and make their contribution, they do it because they want to. No-one is pressing or coercing them. They can lay down their involvement and leave at any time (and sometimes they do!). That they stay and give willingly of

their time, talents and treasures is in itself an encouragement and inspiration. Being part of a voluntary organisation is something to smile about!



*'A voluntary organisation!'*

The second face is frowning and portrays the one who sees it very differently. This person gets frustrated by the fact that a church depends on volunteers. These feelings are strongest when things are not going well. 'If only we could run this place like a business - employ whom we want, remove people who don't do things the way we want and get qualified people to do the work properly, the way we need it done. If only we didn't have to depend on volunteers, who sometimes are good, and sometimes lose interest, withdraw their support, take the huff, have to be pampered, become difficult, it would all be so much better.' To such folk, being in a voluntary organisation feels like a constant uphill struggle.



*'...a voluntary organisation...'*

The third face portrays bewilderment. This is the one who believes that 'voluntary organisation' is a contradiction in terms! If it is voluntary, you cannot organise it, because as soon as you start to organise it, it ceases to be voluntary!



*'A voluntary organisation...?...?'*

There is, of course, some truth in all of these views. Certainly it is a delight to be part of a community of people who, of their own free choice, give us their participation. How marvellous! How generous! To be in a company of like-minded people who make a gift of themselves and part of their lives is an inspiration.

The frowning face has a point too. Yes, we are dependent on what abilities and attitudes people bring and these may not always be good. There are complicated and difficult tasks that have to be carried out in a church, and there are different levels of ability and reliability. There are frequent disappointments and frustrations. Adjustments have to be made around people and what they can or can't do. Things do not always go the way we want. 'Ah well,' people may say, 'we are a voluntary organisation, we have to put up with what we can get.'



Tell-tale words like 'put up with' betray that as an unnecessarily negative view. Much more positive is to say that we must make the best of all that we have got and encourage people always to seek ways of improving what they do. There is always room for improvement.

In response to the person who thinks that 'voluntary organisation' is a contradiction in terms, perhaps we can learn from Charles Handy. He agrees that there is 'a taste of truth' concealed in this cynical point of view:

Voluntary organisations do like to emphasize the 'voluntary' and play down the 'organisation', believing that the ends are more important than the means, that the cause is what matters, and, if it matters enough, that will justify any lack of organisation and may even, like a purifying emetic, get rid of it.

He adds that there are even those who believe that virtue is *supposed* to be painful, and that success is irreligious! They think the most religious people are struggling, care-worn martyrs! Organisations that depend on people like that soon find that such folk 'burn out'.

#### **Programme planning**

The story of Martha and Mary in the New Testament (*Luke ch. 10*) still contains much to make us think. I am grateful to my colleague Keith Gilley, who concludes that the best outcome of that story would have been if Martha, Mary and Jesus all joined in to organise the catering, and then all sat down to enjoy the teaching! He is right, and that would have been good organisation, good managerial practice even!

The point is that it *is* possible to be a group of volunteers and still be well organised. Charles Handy goes on to point out that a great deal is known about the way people interact with one another or with organisations, and we can make good use of this knowledge. We can learn, for example:

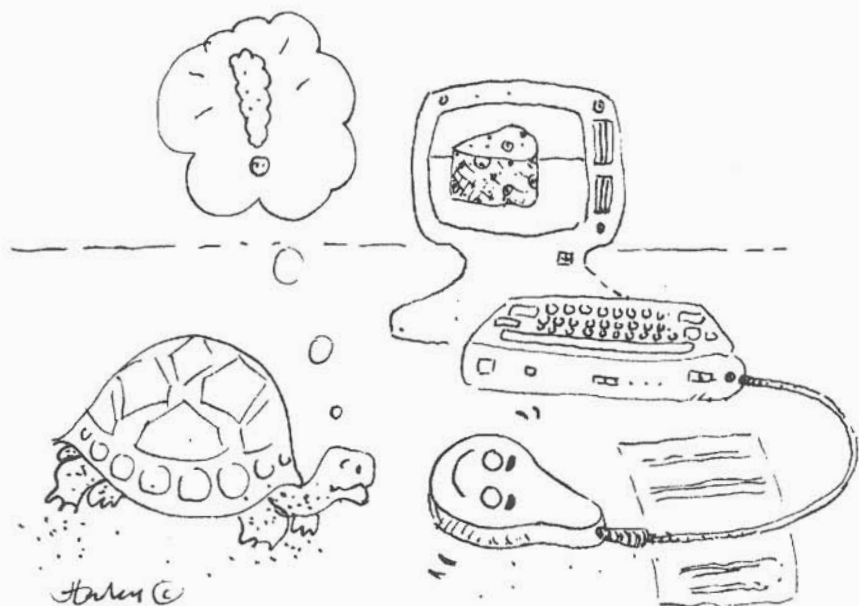
- to define and re-define what the purpose of our congregation is, and make sure we present that well and share it.
- to plan, set goals and create ways of achieving them.
- to divide responsibilities and monitor what is happening or not happening.
- to recruit and deploy leaders, all sorts of leaders for different responsibilities.
- to recruit people for tasks we need to accomplish and, if necessary, train people to improve their skills.

There is more, and it may start to sound business-like and 'we're not a business!' is the frequent cry. The give-away in that comment is the overlooking of the word 'like'. No-one is suggesting that a church becomes a business, but it is surely better to be organised than disorganised.

The writer Richard Seyd put it this way. 'The belief that if your ideas are correct then it doesn't matter how well or badly you put them over, is false.'

Our congregations need volunteers, lots and lots of volunteers prepared to give a great deal, in a variety of ways. The more effectively led and well-organised they operate, the greater will be the achievements and job-satisfaction for all.

Sam says...



*A congregation is not a business, but it is a virtue to be business-like.*

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

When you read or hear the expression 'voluntary organisation', what feelings do you have? How do you react to the story of Martha and Mary in the New Testament? Does your congregation have members who feel that work for their church should be like painful martyrdom?

## THREE THINGS AT ONCE

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**THE DOORBELL RANG**, and there stood a man who attempted to sell me a photograph of my house. It was a picture that had been taken from the air. It was not, in fact, a particularly good photograph, but it set me thinking. I found it a rather strange sensation to look at something very familiar - the very house I live in - but to see it from this unusual perspective.

I was prompted to further thought when I saw that not only did the photograph show the house, but also the chapel, the local police station, a local hospital, a small factory, a 'working-men's club' and some shops and houses. I found myself thinking what a variety of organisations there were in such a small area.

Some of the buildings were homes, some were the premises of businesses like the shops and the factory. Some, like the police station and the hospital, were buildings used by government organisations. The club is - well - a private club. But what sort of organisation is a church? One on its own I suppose, but the nearest category one might put it in is *voluntary organisations*. As has been stated elsewhere, people come along and join a congregation as volunteers.

A good deal of study has been given to voluntary organisations. There are many thousands of them of one sort or another. Putting it simply, we can refer to Charles Handy again and see that voluntary organisations fall, generally speaking, under three headings:

1. **Mutual support groups** Examples would be a pensioners' club, a single-parent families association, an arthritis or stroke association (there are several to do with the needs of people with a certain illness), Alcoholics Anonymous, philatelists' clubs and collectors of just about everything you could imagine have their own organisation. Also, people who have an interest in every possible game or sport or activity have a club or an association, usually with a magazine. The only qualification for entry is that you share the interest and pay the subscription. Anyone who has an interest in anything usually finds that the way to develop it is to join a group of like-minded people.

2. **Service delivery groups** These are the organisations that actually do something for people. Examples would be RNLI, St. John's Ambulance Brigade, Mountain Rescue, Samaritans, Relate (formerly Marriage Guidance Council) and many, many more. People who join are those who are willing to learn a skill and offer it to those who need it.

3. **Campaigning groups** Examples would be Shelter, Greenpeace, Child Poverty Action Group, Friends of the Earth and all political parties. People who join are those who believe in something they want to promote, and who want to change people's views and behaviour, to promote the cause.

Keep in mind that there is sometimes some overlapping, and a group may come under more than one heading.

So, having roughly defined three kinds of voluntary organisation, and considering that a Unitarian congregation is one, which of the three categories does it come into?

I recall staring at this list for some time before the realisation dawned. The fact is that *all three headings are applicable!* A congregation is a mutual support group, *and* a service delivery group *and* a campaigning organisation - all at the same time.

A congregation is a *mutual support* group. People who share an interest in a religious way of life with a Unitarian flavour come together to share their mutual interest and support one another.

A congregation *is a service delivery group*. Our congregations offer a number of services: worship services, rites of passage, educational opportunities for adults and children, spiritual development, pastoral care, opportunities for social action and so on.

A congregation is also a *campaigning group*. It endeavours to promote Unitarianism as a way of life, as well as 'civil and religious liberty', justice, democracy, peace and other values.

So, there they are, all three categories at once! The thought then occurred to me, 'No wonder life in a congregation often seems complicated - even confusing at times! No wonder we are often unsure of ourselves, and forever running in several directions simultaneously. Here's the explanation - *we are all trying to do three very different things at once!*'

In addition to these three, there are the factors of all the practical work of raising money, maintaining the property and so on.

Since becoming aware of these categories, I have found myself looking at congregations and wondering on which of the three they put their main emphasis. Is this congregation simply a mutual support group, focusing on the needs of its members, but offering nothing to others out there in the world? Or is it one that has a lot to offer, with all manner of activities going on, but with no time given to being supportive of the people who are there by being interested in them as people? And what about 'the cause'? Does your congregation promote Unitarianism and its values in anything like a campaigning way? Does your notice-board positively promote, clearly and unmistakably, what Unitarianism is *for*, meaning '*in favour of*'?

Let me make myself clear and state that I am in favour of all three dimensions of our congregational life. I want the lot. I think that a good, viable, living congregation, fulfilling its potential, will be able to show a good track record in all three. It's asking a lot, I know.

If category 1 is missing, it could be complained that no-one is interested in persons, neither the regulars nor newcomers and their views, their needs and what they may have to contribute.

If category 2 is missing, it could be commented that they are nice people but they don't *do* anything.

If category 3 is missing, then it could be observed that the congregation has nothing to say to the world. It is talking to itself. It has become like a club.

If a congregation presents as only one kind of organisation, it will attract only one kind of person. Present as all three kinds, and there is a trebling of the kinds of people who might value coming along.

To those who find that working in their congregation often becomes stressful and that they lose track of the point of it all, it may help to consider the three jobs that a congregation is trying to do at once, and see if the balance is right.

### **Types of leadership**

Each of the (at least) three purposes of a congregation requires different leadership talents and abilities:

- people to keep the congregation together as a mutual support group.
- people with skills to deliver the worship, educational and pastoral services.
- people with the courage and capabilities to present Unitarianism in an attractive and persuasive way.

Spare a thought for the minister. He or she is usually expected to be a star performer in all three departments, all the time, each and every day!

### **Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

Which of the three categories best fits your congregation? What services do you offer? How do you promote the campaign for Unitarianism?



## A LITTLE GENTLE BROWSING

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**BOOKSHOPS CAN BE** somewhat dangerous places! I'm sure you know what I mean. I have dropped into a bookshop for five minutes and emerged an hour and ten minutes later carrying volumes that I had never intended to buy.

I also enjoy reading book catalogues and reviews in magazines and journals. I sometimes think that there just aren't enough years in a lifetime to read all that I'd like to. I often have to content myself with simply reading the reviews, or the blurb on the flyleaf, or even simply the title! I also admit to being something of a sceptic, a little suspicious of books whose titles begin with, 'How to...!'

Then again, I am sceptical about my own scepticism, and I have read several books with such titles.

A good read of a helpful, stimulating book, can be a delight. I cannot remember the number of times I have read something and have thought to myself, 'Good heavens, why didn't I know about that years ago! Ah well, better late than never.' It came as a great surprise to discover that there are books about churches, and how congregations get on, thriving or declining as the case may be. I once found myself staring in near disbelief at a catalogue, and having to exercise great restraint. Whew!

These are some of the titles that jumped out at me. Some made me smile, some made me groan, many of them simply made me think, 'Good heavens!'

*Making the Small Church Effective* by Carl S. Dudley is a title to make one think. Presumably making it 'effective' means simply making it into a big church? Not so, it turns out. 'Small' and 'effective' are not mutually exclusive terms. It is possible to have a good, exciting, valuable and enjoyable 'small' church.

*Activating the Passive Church* by Lyle E. Schaller sounds interesting too. Plenty of churches I know could be described as passive, and some ministers too! 'Activating' sounds very positive and helpful. Carl S. Dudley's *Energizing the Congregation* sounds similar. *Raising Small Church Esteem* by Steven Burt and Hazel Roper certainly got me thinking. Plenty of our congregations have low self-esteem. It's one of our major problems. A few ideas towards eliminating that and we would be well on our way. *Transforming Congregations for the Future* by Loren Mead sounds a bit ambitious, but what's wrong with being ambitious?

I like the sound of this one; *More Than Numbers - the Way Churches Grow* by Loren Mead again. I'm sure there is more to growth than simply numbers of people coming through the doors. After all, one can grow in quality as well as quantity. There you are, just reading the title has got me thinking. *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church* by Kennon Callahan. The cover notes say it is a step-by-step approach.

This sounds like fun! *We've Never Done It Like This Before* by Jeff Woods. The sub-title gives some clues, *10 Creative approaches to the same old church tasks*. I wonder what would happen if somebody just left a copy of that on the table at a church committee meeting? Speaking of such, there is this: *Church Meetings that Work* by Gaylord Noyce. It has a big tick on the cover. And what about this? *How to Mobilize Church Volunteers* by Marlene Wilson. That's another 'How to...!', but it could be very appropriate where the work is falling on the faithful few. *The Care and Feeding of Volunteers* sounds nice!

Here's Lyle E. Schaller again: *44 Ways to Increase Church Attendance*. Now that's got to be worth a try. If only one or two of the *44 Ways* work, the book will have been worth it. And this title says a lot: *The Inviting Church; a study in new member assimilation* by Roy. M. Oswald and Speed B. Leas. It seems that some people have actually *studied* this sort of thing. I used to think it was all done by trial and error.

This looks interesting: *Managing Church Conflict* by Hugh Halverstadt. Most people go to church for a bit of peace! Then again, conflicts do emerge, as we all know. Good to think that someone has given some thought to that too. *Surviving Difficult Church Members* by Robert Dale; well now, I expect every congregation has somebody to whom that applies (not *me* of course!).

Now, here's a bold title! *The Whole Truth About Everything Related to the Church in Twelve Pages*. That's got to be a joke! Mind you, it's by that Loren Mead again, and looks serious enough.

*Music in Churches: Nourishing Your Congregation's Musical Life* by Linda J. Clark. I like the sound of that too.

I have to say that most of these books mentioned are American in origin. This means that some adjustments have to be made in language and for the British scene, but not as many as one might think. Two books that have become great favourites of mine are very British. *Understanding Voluntary Organisations* by Charles Handy (you may have heard him on the radio, doing *Thought for the Day*). I keep going back to that and it has prompted me to read most of his other books. Also, *Not Bosses But Leaders* by John Adair makes a fascinating read. Just think about the title. It actually comes from the world of management, but I find that if I change the words 'manager' or 'leader' to 'minister' as I go along, it works very well.

There are also magazines that publish articles on churches. Most of these are American too, but worth thinking about. There is always a lot of optimism around, a sort of 'can do' attitude, which makes a change! An example is, *Committees Can Make a Church More Inviting!* and *Outreach Communications that Show How Your Congregation Meets People's Needs*. I like the sound of *Be An Angel's Advocate!* That's a plea to counter the character in a committee who always says, 'let me be devil's advocate'... before raising objections to everything. It was in a magazine that I came across the thought-provoking, 'It's hard to look up to a leader who always has his/ her ear to the ground.'

All good stuff to make you think.

So, there's a gentle browse in the world of literature on congregational development, all fascinating and very helpful. Beware, reading books like this could change your life, and the life of your congregation too!

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

Have you ever read a book that helped you in your work for your congregation? Could you imagine such a book-reading group at your church?

## The BIGGER PICTURE -1

### How it works

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**CONGREGATIONS ARE GROUPED** into District Associations (DAs) and the national body, the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches (GA). All denominations are like this. Few if any churches are absolutely independent. One way or another congregations like to get together for various purposes, thank goodness.

Our DAs and the GA are voluntary associations. No authority requires anyone to participate, but there is enormous benefit (along with certain problems) in doing so.

One organisational term to describe these associations is 'federation'. Charles Handy describes the concept of a federation in some depth in his writings. He maintains that federalism is the best system, because it attempts to meet the needs of local groups, whilst also enjoying the benefits of being part of something larger. He becomes particularly interesting when he distinguishes between a federation and a confederation. The latter is a grouping for mutual advantage and expediency. To some extent our DAs and the GA are like that.

However, in a federation, there is more. There is common purpose, in which sacrifices are made and compromises become acceptable. The stronger help the weaker, the richer help the poorer, and there are common standards and aspirations. If congregations wish to grow, it is of immense value to participate in the life and work of the DAs and

the GA. It may not always be easy, nor clear what the benefits are. Such groupings are often somewhat untidy and tricky to manage well, but we would be immeasurably worse off without them. Being a member of a small unit called a congregation *and* being part of a bigger movement makes sense, but managing it makes problems.

#### **Getting it right**

I have mentioned that Charles Handy speaks so positively of the idea of federalism, because that is the system which we have in fact already got in place. It is very reassuring to me to consider that a former professor, widely experienced, highly regarded researcher, writer and broadcaster on organisational development, should be saying that we are doing it right!

Charles Handy gives a useful analogy that fits our experience:

When I married, I thought that I was joining two lives together, mine and that of the girl I loved. It was only when we started to arrange the wedding that I realised that I was also becoming the affiliated member of a new tribe, her large and extended family. I now had my own tribe and hers, twin citizenships and twin loyalties to be reconciled and balanced.

Just so, when someone joins a congregation they will soon become aware that they are part of this 'extended family or tribe'. It consists of all the other congregations of the district and the nation, with some 'relatives' who live overseas, too.

### **Meet the family**

If a congregation holds a 'welcome into membership' ceremony for newcomers, it would be well to at least make mention of or, better still positively affirm these wider associations.

Another way of looking at it is to use the term 'twin citizenship'. We all know people who will tell you, for example, that they are proud to be Lancastrians, Cockneys, Scots or Devonians. At the same time, they are British. Frequently, tricky issues arise about that, as our entrance into the European Union has revealed, and there are complicated debates to be undertaken around such concepts as subsidiarity. For the moment let's keep this matter simple. We are invited to participate in 'twin citizenship', and hold in our minds two concepts at once: our membership of our local congregation *and* our membership of a wider movement. There are times when accepting this invitation is a delight, and times when it is an irritation (just like being part of an extended family!). Tact, diplomacy and patience are sometimes required.

The benefits and also the problems of this 'twin citizenship' are not difficult to see.

The enjoyment of membership of a small, local congregation is to do with what is manageable and affordable, as well as providing friendship and mutual support on a fairly immediate, even intimate level.

The disadvantages of focusing merely on one's own congregation are pretty obvious. Individual congregations are too small for some important matters. For example, it would simply not be possible for each congregation to select, train and deploy its own professional ministers, so we have a national system for that.

The advantages of being part of a wider movement are mainly about resources which otherwise are out of reach. An example would be to consider the craziness of each congregation trying to publish its own hymn book.

The disadvantage of participating in the larger dimension is that it takes time, energy and money; more meetings, more decision-making, more work, more responsibility, some self-sacrifice.

There are questions of authority and influence to be understood in all of this. The DAs and the GA do not have authority to compel participation or compliance, but they do have influence. The final authority for decisions made in a congregation is the congregation itself. Sometimes this rests more precisely with the trustees, sometimes with the managing committee elected by the congregation, sometimes by the congregation at a general meeting. However, when congregations choose to collaborate and form the DAs and the GA, they thereby choose to concede *some* of their independence to the district or national body.

For example, if a congregation chooses not to pay its minister a stipend at the full, recommended rate, then both the DA and the GA will probably withhold grant aid to that congregation. This is in order to maintain the principles and standards that the GA wishes to promote. We must remember that those principles and standards have been arrived at by the representatives of all the member congregations, if they chose to participate in the decision-making.



**Power upwards**

In a federal system, power is delegated upwards, rather than downwards. The power, such as it is, does not reside at the centre to be handed out or down to the 'branches'. It is the branches that hold the power, but sometimes relinquish some of it to the centre.

For the sacrificing of some independence to be worthwhile, the congregations have to feel some confidence in the central or district organisation. The way to create and maintain that confidence is to remain active in the decision-making, and to make your views known.

It also makes a great deal of sense to organise all manner of opportunities for education, training and development of ministers and lay-people on a national scale rather than each congregation trying to go its own way. It is sensible and valuable to have a national presence for purposes of publicity and communication, and also to undertake national programmes or present a national stance or point of view on social issues of the day. Also, there are some resources of money available to congregations which must be managed at a national level.

Much the same can be said for districts. Our DAs can usually collaborate for all the purposes mentioned above: ministry, education, publicity, social responsibility and finance. It cannot be sensible for individual congregations each to be continually re-inventing their own wheels.

In addition, there is a psychological and spiritual richness and benefit to be gained from mutual support. The feeling of strength, encouragement and uplift of being part of a larger body is something hard to measure but of immense value. Here are other congregations, with problems and frustrations as well as benefits and achievements, just like yours.

Some aspects of this mutual support are often missed, usually because we overlook the word 'mutual'. There is at least as much enrichment to be experienced in *giving* encouragement to smaller or weaker congregations, as there is in being on the receiving end of such help. Also, for those who find most benefit in their church life by taking on responsible posts, there are ample opportunities, at DA and GA level, for servicing the committees and departments.

I encourage all congregations to participate in the 'big picture' activities. It can be costly in time, energy and money. Quota payments have to be made, but it is an investment well spent.

### **Which way round?**

I have often heard it suggested that the reason a certain congregation is weak is because it does not participate in district and national activities. I am inclined to view it the other way round. It is more likely that congregations do not participate in DA and GA activities *because they are weak* - or consider themselves to be so. They feel that it takes all the time and energy they have, simply to keep their own little group going. They have nothing to spare for the bigger picture.

Conversely, when congregations begin to develop and grow, and start to feel a little stronger and more self-confident, they then look up and around, discover other congregations just like them, and begin to attend and participate in district and national activities.

Participation in this bigger picture not only buys material benefits, but also purchases the maintenance of our presence as a religious movement with our standards, aspirations and willingness to be of support. We are a federation, not a confederation. We need the two levels, the twin citizenship. It all depends upon a willingness to think of two things at once.

Sam says..



*I like the idea of a congregation having a banner and enjoy watching them all being paraded in at our GA Annual Meetings. But I think something may be missing. We ALSO need one, big banner representing the General Assembly as a whole.*

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

Has your congregation got a banner? Could you design one? If you were to depict the General Assembly as an animal, what animal would you choose? Do you agree with Sam about a GA banner? Could you design one?

## THE BIGGER PICTURE - 2

### An Array of Resources

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**THE WORD WHICH**, I think, best describes the value of our District Associations and the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, is *resource*. If a congregation has the intention of developing and promoting its growth, they can turn for support to the resources of these larger groups.

Some examples:

Supposing a congregation decides that it wants to develop by appointing a minister or lay pastor. It can turn to its DA and the GA and ask questions about possible sources of money, as well as possible candidates, the appropriate procedures, plus any thoughts on linkages or groupings, if these are the only way to make the appointment viable. Simply to tackle this alone makes no sense. There is accumulated experience and knowledge of good practice.

If a congregation decides it wants to develop by starting up or re-invigorating its provision for children, it can turn to the GA's Religious Education department for ideas, training and materials. Likewise, the GA is a resource for adult education programmes, including training of layfolk in leadership skills and for enrichment of worship.

A congregation that decides to develop by broadening its social concerns can use our Social Responsibility department as a resource.

If publicity is the way forward in development, then our Information Department exists as the resource.

There is much more. Our denomination, small though it is, offers a great array of ideas and inspiration. There are all sorts of resources for young and old, such as events, gatherings, things to read as well as training courses and other opportunities including holidays. Our denominational newspapers like *The Inquirer* and *The Unitarian* are a resource too. As well as articles and information, they continually report events and activities on the district, national and international scene that are available to all.

\*

It could be extremely valuable to have someone (at least one person) who makes a point of keeping abreast of all that is available at district and national level. We might call this a 'denominational affairs officer'. This person or persons could perhaps serve as a link between district, denomination and the local church and make sure that the committee and the whole congregation are kept aware of

- national and district meetings where decisions are made and policies formed
- events, courses, conferences and all manner of gatherings for worship study, training and social activities
- publicity materials and all sorts of religious education, lay training and development resources
- all the denominational publications, groups and societies
- staff and personnel resources and advice available
- news or current concerns, activities, successes and failures in the wider movement

The best person(s) for such a task would be someone who could be informed, articulate and enthusiastic about what the congregation can receive from the wider movement and contribute to it. The 'denominational affairs person(s)' will not necessarily be the delegate to district or the GA. The more that work is shared, the better.

At present, in most congregations, knowledge and awareness of all of this comes by accidental 'finding out'. It would be immeasurably better if this was all handled purposefully, carefully and enthusiastically.

Sam says...



*Never let it be said in your congregation, 'If only we had been aware. We didn't know this was available to us! We would have enjoyed attending that...'*

**Some questions for thinking and talking about:**

What resources of the GA does your congregation use? How many of you read *The Inquirer*? What resources does your DA offer? In your congregation, who knows most about what is going on in the wider movement? Is that knowledge shared? What strengths or skills do you have that you could offer a struggling congregation?

**ONE UNEXPECTED EFFECT** of writing these essays has been the discovery that there is much more that merits thought and attention, enough for several books perhaps. I am aware of glaring omissions in this one, and I have a strong hope that readers will be saying to themselves, 'Yes but what about...?'

Some topics that are missing that come immediately to mind are mainly in the area of leadership, both ministerial and lay. It has been a challenge and a delight to be on the team of the Unitarian Lay Leadership Schools. I have participated in in-service training courses for ministers, as well as making input into a number of Ministers' Conferences. I also had a part in the first conference that created the Unitarian Association of Lay Leaders. Central among the issues regarding the development of our movement is the fact that our congregations need leaders, lots and lots of able leaders for a whole range of tasks. In some situations, the need for confident and competent leadership is almost desperate. There may be a whole book of essays waiting to be written on this crucial topic alone.

I am also aware that these essays do not enter directly into theological issues, though I am hopeful that the theological questions are frequently implied or can be inferred from what I have written, if we care to interpret the essays that way. During my years as Development Officer I was well aware of the theological diversity that exists among us, mainly indicated by the language we prefer to use. I also suspect, though of course I cannot prove, that some Unitarians, individuals and congregations, avoided contact with me and the Development Commission because they believed they knew my theological stance and felt that not only was it incompatible with theirs, but that I would challenge their stance and perhaps try to



impose mine. This, of course, never happened. I offered to share ideas and activities in congregational development with whoever would give me a hearing, regardless of prevailing theological tendencies.

Most of all I am aware that these essays do not tackle the issue of Unitarian identity. This, too, is a big enough topic to merit a book of its own. That it is difficult to describe or explain what a Unitarian is, even to ourselves, is a factor of the most profound significance in my view. We do not have a statement of our values and principles towards which we can point. Some congregations loyally continue to display the renowned, classic expression of Unitarian beliefs, in the words *The fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, the leadership of Jesus, salvation by character, the progress of mankind onward and upward forever*. Most Unitarians, however, regard those sentiments and the language in which they are expressed as part of our past, but out of tune with present needs and aspirations.

The lack of identity is, in my view, a major barrier to our development and growth. Such work on this issue that I have been able to undertake, has been with individual congregations, in encouraging them to create statements that express their values and principles, to themselves, and to anyone else who may hear. How much better it would be if we had a generally accepted denominational statement that we could confidently use. Meanwhile, the dreaded question, 'But *what is a Unitarian?*' continues to haunt and inhibit us.

By contrast, I have found myself, over and over again, contemplating the potential of our congregations. My frequent impression has been that within the hearts and minds of the men and women who loyally support churches and chapels all over Britain, there is a yearning to see them become effective and satisfying centres of Unitarian work and worship. I have been encouraged and even inspired by seeing previously shy or inhibited people taking a deep breath, sharing their thoughts and hopes, and 'having a go' at rethinking the life and work of their congregation. I have witnessed and felt growing excitement,

awareness of potential and enjoyment of the adventure of development, even in small and previously dispirited groups.

Two final quotations, first from John Harvey-Jones:

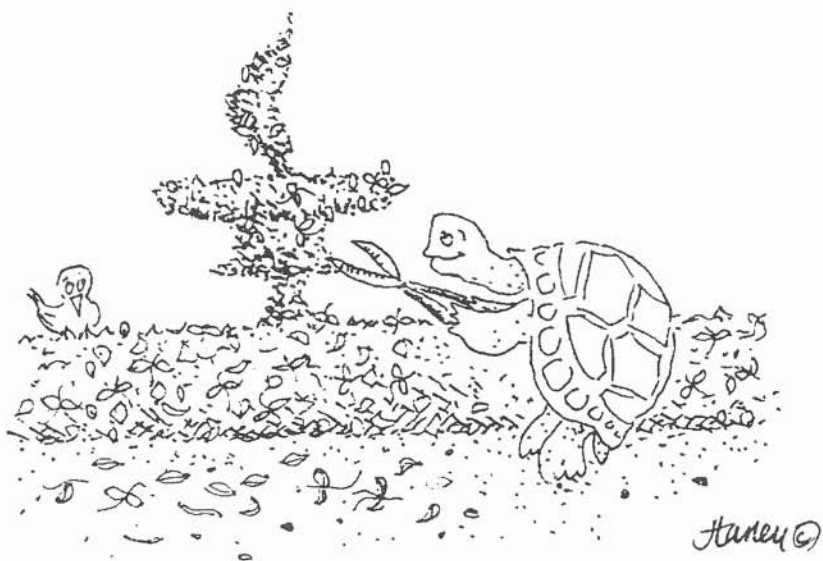
I have been encouraged to write this book to draw on my experience to outline some of the practical things which might be done... My views are not meant to be prescriptive. As in everything else I have done, written or talked about, my hope is that a comment, example or thought will strike a responsive chord. I hope that others will be made aware of the problems and begin producing their own solutions. The room for improvement is so vast, and the rewards so great that even a tiny tilt of attention to this critical area of human activity will have enormous results... it is a win-win situation... there are no losers in this field of trying to improve our skills both individually and collectively.

Somewhat similarly, from Charles Handy:

This book is not a 'cookbook'. It holds few recipes for success. Don't look for the quick organisational fix, or for the comfortable slogan. If, however, it helps you think again about what you took for granted, to question the conventional and to trust your own intuitions, then it will have worked; for good books, like great art and great music, produce effects beyond themselves. And, at the end, don't keep this book. Burn it and write your own - for writing is thinking, and like the Irishman you can know what you think about many matters only when you hear what you say or see what you write!

Amen, say I, to all that. And finally,

Sam says,



*Look well to the growing edge.*

For further reading...

*Understanding Voluntary Organisations* Charles Handy.  
Pelican 1988. ISBN 0 - 14 - 022491 - 2

*Making It Happen* John Harvey-Jones  
Fontanel 1988 ISBN 0 - 00 - 637409 - 3

*Making the Small Church Effective* Carl. S. Dudley  
Abingdon 1978 ISBN 0 - 687 - 23044 - 6

*Not Bosses But Leaders* John Adair  
Kogan Page 1990 ISBN 0 - 7494 - 0270 - 9

*Twelve Keys to an Effective Church* Kennon L. Callahan  
Harper and Row 1983 ISBN 0 - 06 - 061297 - 5

*Looking in the Mirror* Lyle Schaller  
Abingdon 1984 ISBN 0 - 687 22635 - X