

Feed the Spiritually Hungry, House the Religiously Homeless

Keynote, 2007 PCD Annual Conference

Peter Morales

Senior Minister, Jefferson Unitarian Church

Feb. 27, 2006

It is great to be back in the PCD again. I have spent much of my life here. I came here when I was 17 years old. I rode a bus for 48 hours from San Antonio to Stockton, where I attended the University of the Pacific. I lived in Sacramento for eight years as a young man. While trying to avoid the draft during Vietnam I taught school in Contra Costa County. I attended Starr King and did my internship in Davis. My wife's family lives in Lake County (her brother Peter and his wife Kathy are here this morning). This is kind of a homecoming. Thank you for inviting me back.

Now, I need to warn you this morning. I have some bad news. Some very bad news. Frankly, my hope is that you will find my comments deeply disturbing. For unless we UU's get profoundly disturbed our future is very bleak. Later on I will share some good news, so hang in there.

Our movement is in trouble here in the Pacific Central District. Actually, we are in big trouble nationally. Part of our problem is that our leaders, in a misguided effort to be upbeat, engage in a kind of happy-talk that seeks to put a positive spin on what is happening.

I want to review some of the facts that I find profoundly unsettling. Let's begin with the national movement. I want to share some statistics with you. First, let me say a word about numbers. I sometimes hear people say that growth is more than just numbers. Such a point of view is almost entirely nonsense. Growth is about numbers. However, we have to remember that numbers are not about numbers. Unless we are doing pure mathematics, numbers are about real things. I am going to share some statistics. But remember that these statistics represent real people.

Let me also add that for me, growth is not really our goal. Our goal is to offer a religious home, to feed the spiritually hungry. Our goal is to make a difference in people's lives. Growth is not the goal. However, our growth (or lack of it) is the best measure we have of how well we are meeting the religious needs of people. And, sadly, the statistics tell a sad story.

- Since the merger of the Unitarians and the Universalists 46 years ago, our movement has not grown at all. During that time the national population has grown by about 50 percent. We began as a tiny part of religion in America. We are even tinier now.

- Actually, our numbers declined in the 1970s and have actually climbed slowly since then. We have grown at the rate of one percent per year for the last 20 years. This, however, is far below the rate of population growth. So even though our absolute numbers are going up very, very slowly, we continue to have a decreasing slice of the pie.

- While these numbers are true, they are misleading. When we dig into what is actually happening, we find that a tiny minority of churches account for most of our growth. When I served as the UUA's director of district services a few years ago, I looked at the membership numbers for every church in the movement for the previous 10 years. (OK, so I'm a little obsessive.) It turns out that 15 churches accounted for a quarter of our growth in the previous decade.

- The 60 fastest growing churches in that decade accounted for about two-thirds of our growth. In other words, about six percent of our more than 1000 congregations accounted for two-thirds of our growth.

- In other words, 94 percent of our congregations accounted for only a third of our growth.

- This means that we have a relative handful of congregations that are growing at a healthy clip. The others are stuck or are in decline.

Are you getting just a wee bit disturbed yet?

Now let's look at PCD. I am sorry to report that things are actually worse here. Here are recent facts about your district:

- Last year the congregations in PCD actually lost membership. You reported 70 fewer members in January of 2007 than the previous year.

- In the last four years, from 2003 to 2007, you did a little better. You lost only 15 (you were essentially flat).

- If we go back nine years, from 1998 to 2007, you actually gained membership. There are 345 more members now than there were nine years ago. While this is better than losing membership over the last nine years, 345 is a pretty paltry number. This amounts to one additional member per congregation per year. Let me repeat that. In the past nine years the total membership in PCD has increased at a rate of one person per congregation per year.

- In fact, as you well know, your individual congregations are all over the map. In the past decade you range from one congregation losing 86 members all the way to one gaining 108.

Now, one might reasonably ask why I think that this is so bad. After all, maybe we have essentially saturated our little niche of the religious marketplace. Maybe holding our own is all we should aspire to.

Let me tell you why that argument won't hold up. And I suspect that the vast majority of you in here today don't buy that argument.

The reason our lack of growth drives me crazy (and why it should drive you crazy) is that there are hundreds of thousands of people in America who long for liberal religious community.

Let's look at some other numbers. These numbers are less precise, but they are absolutely important.

- We have a staggering number of visitors coming to our churches. Incidentally, I find it telling that so few of our churches bother to count visitors. Here we are, a movement that has always relied on drawing our membership from visitors. Alas, we don't do a very good job of holding on to our youth. If we didn't have people who were not raised UU joining our churches, our movement would die in a generation. Visitors are our life blood. Yet we typically don't know how many people are coming to check us out.

- Well, at my congregation we do count. And when I was traveling around the country as director of district services, I would check with churches. Here is what I have found. Almost all of our churches have more visitors every year than they have members. Think about it. If your congregation has 150 members, you only need to average three visitors a week to get to 150. Hey, you get Easter and Christmas for starters. Some churches I spoke with get twice the number of visitors in a year as they have members. Think about that. Again, for our fictional pastoral size church of 150 members, that only means getting six visitors per Sunday. Some days you have fewer, some Sundays you have more.

- Well, now let's do a little math. Let's estimate that our church of 150 gets around 200 visitors a year. That is probably a little conservative. Think about what this means nationally. Our Association reports just over 150,000 adult members in our congregations. This means that nationally we get something like 200,000 visitors a year. My hunch is that it is probably more like 250,000—but let's be conservative here.

- Now let's apply this to PCD. In a given year, you probably get more than 9,000 visitors. In the last decade, you have had more than 90,000 visitors—90,000 visitors! You get about 175 visitors every Sunday.

- If we had converted just one percent more of these people into new UUs, just one measly percent, our growth would have tripled. If we had converted just three percent of these people into members, we would be growing at 10 percent per year. In a few years we would be scrambling to add additional services and starting capital campaigns to enlarge our facilities. We would have to start recruiting a lot more ministers.

Now what I am going to say next might sound a little harsh. I'm sorry. (Actually, I'm not sorry at all.) Please hear this: the secret to growing our movement and the secret to growing your congregation is to repel fewer visitors. It is really that simple. We need to repel fewer visitors.

This, in fact, is what our fast growing churches do. When we look at those churches that have grown, some fascinating characteristics jump out. One of them is that, to my knowledge, none of our growing churches has had a growth plan. These fast growing churches are as likely to have an old minister as a young minister. Some of our fastest growing churches are urban, others are suburban. Some are in the west, some in the east. Some have male ministers, others have female

ministers. Yet all of these churches are able to repel fewer visitors; there is something about them that is attractive, something that meets the deep needs of the religious seeker.

Now, our Association has been trying to help grow our movement. We have tried a number of approaches. We had the Extension program, which tried to grow churches by helping small and new congregations pay for a minister for a few years. Extension had a few successes. Overall, however, it had almost no effect. In the last year of the program the Extension Program barely accounted for an additional 100 members nationwide.

During the current UUA administration we have tried a combination of starting large churches in metropolitan areas and marketing.

Our one attempt to start a large church in the Dallas-Ft. Worth area was a disaster. The plan was to have a church of more than one thousand. I repeatedly heard that if this new congregation grew to be “only” 600 in the first few years it would be a failure. The reality is that, after spending a million dollars, it has about 80 members and has had to cut way back on staff. Their minister is leaving at the end of this church year. We are now trying the same model in the Philadelphia suburbs. I pray that it is more successful. But the truth is, it really doesn’t matter in the great scheme of things.

Our other big initiative in the last few years has been marketing. We have tried marketing in Kansas City, Houston, in Southern California. And I am told that you are beginning a campaign in the Bay Area. I know that our denominational officials are very positive about marketing. My own take on the results is that they are mixed. I have nothing against advertising. I was a newspaper publisher before going to seminary. I sold advertising. Advertising fed my children. Certainly, a well done marketing effort can raise awareness of our faith and will generate more visitors. Some of them will join. You can expect to spend about \$2000 per new member. A media campaign will help generate some excitement among your members and some pride about being UU’s. That is a good thing.

But we need to put this in perspective. Advertising is not going to save our movement. In order to reverse the trend of our decline, growing by one percent per year won’t cut it. We need to grow by something like five percent per year. We need to add 7500 members per year every single year. We would need to spend something on the order of \$15 million per year on advertising to do that. Our entire denominational budget is just over \$20 million.

The sad fact is that we do not have a growth strategy. A real growth strategy has to meet several criteria:

1. It would have to actually lead to growth on the order of four, five, or six percent per year. Neither advertising nor starting large churches can do that. Together they can’t do that.
2. Any real growth strategy must be doable with the resources we have or can raise. There is no way we can raise enough money for the current approach to work.

3. In addition, I think a real growth strategy must be something in which every single congregation can participate. Growing this movement of ours must not be somebody else's job in some office far away. It is my job. It is your job.

4. Finally, I believe that a real growth strategy should emerge naturally and logically out of what is best in our religious identity and tradition.

We don't have a growth strategy today. We have never had a growth strategy that had a prayer of working. I say it is about time we got one.

So, in a nutshell, here is our situation. We are shrinking as a part of American life. We don't have a growth strategy that has a prayer. As a district, you are a mess.

Now for the good news. It does not have to be this way. We can change all of that. We can change it all starting next Sunday. And it won't cost anything.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of our current efforts to grow our movement is that they unintentionally deliver a message that is simply not true. When we focus on expensive new church starts and marketing, our leaders give the message that our lack of growth is a technical problem. Behind our efforts is the assumption that we need to find the right technique, the right catch phrase (like "Uncommon Denomination"). The assumption is also that we need to raise a lot of money. Finally, our current growth efforts convey the message that growing our movement is really a problem that will be solved by someone else, somebody far away in some office, somebody with expertise.

All of this is wrong. Our problem is not technical. Our problem is not the lack of enough money. We don't need better branding.

Our problem is religious. The solution is religion.

Let me explain.

Let me illustrate what I mean by telling a story about the church I serve. The congregation I serve, Jefferson Unitarian Church in the Denver suburbs, did not grow at all for 20 years. Our church was stuck at 400 members. A graph of our membership over 20 years looks like Interstate 5 between Sacramento and Stockton: absolutely flat.

In the last eight years we have grown from 400 members to 760 members. And you know what? We screw up all the time. I mess up all the time. You don't have to be superhuman to grow. I am not one of the great preachers in our movement. We face the same challenges you do. Our members are just like the people in your church. We struggle to keep our youth just like you do. We struggle to raise enough money just like you do. Yet we have managed to grow steadily.

What happened?

We got religion. Really. The one growth strategy we have never tried as a movement is religion. [repeat] And religion is the only growth strategy that will work. What do I mean by

“getting religion”? What happened at Jefferson and has happened at dozens of other growing churches?

I’ll tell you. But first we need to back up a minute.

It all goes back to those hundreds of thousands of visitors we get every year, and the 9,000 or so you get every year right here in PCD.

Who are these people? Why in the world do they disrupt their Sunday routine to come to one of our churches? What are they looking for?

We need to understand what is going on in America today. Americans are lonelier today than they have ever been. This does not get nearly the attention it should in the press or in our discussions of the spiritual and emotional needs people bring with them.

About a year ago an earth-shaking research paper was published in the American Sociological Review. Now, I suspect that no one in here subscribes to this academic journal. (Academic sociology journals have a well deserved reputation for sending people into near fatal comas.) But this research was so important it was actually picked up in major newspapers.

The research sought to measure changes in the close relationships Americans have. A key question in the study asked subjects how many people they feel close enough to that they feel they can confide personal information. An earlier study, done in 1985, asked the same question. The new study was designed to measure any changes over time. The results were so shocking that the team of sociologists doing the study withheld publication for a while. They were afraid they had made some mistake in the methodology and spent months reviewing their data and procedures. But the results were real. Here are the key findings:

- In 1985, the modal response (the response given most often) was having three people in whom one could confide. In 2004, the modal response was zero.
- The percentage of people who said they had no one with whom they could confide jumped from 10 percent in 1985 to 25 percent in 2004. That means that in just 20 years the percent of people who said they have no one to talk to went from one person in ten to one out of every four. This is simply shocking.
- Almost half of all Americans now either have no one or only one person with whom they can discuss important matters. The percent of people who either have no one or only one person has almost doubled in 20 years.
- If a person has only one confidant, chances are that the one confidant is his or her spouse. What this means is that relationships beyond the nuclear family are being systematically eliminated.

I know that this can sound like just numbers. Listen more carefully. Hear the cry of pain in these numbers. This study reveals a level of human isolation that is unprecedented in American life—and perhaps unprecedented in human history. Americans are lonelier than they have ever

been. The close friendships that are so essential to us are being eroded at a frightening rate. One in four Americans has no close personal relationship at all. Zero.

We need a chain saw to cut through the irony here. We have cell phones and internet connections and instant messaging and call waiting. Connecting to others electronically has never been easier. Yet we have fewer people we can really talk to than ever before.

Let me throw just one more statistic at you. At the end of the Second World War about half of all American households had three generations in them. That means that about half of American children lived under the same roof with one or more grandparents. Today there are almost no three generation households left. The two or three percent of multi-generational households that exist are almost all poor recent immigrants.

Today, one out of four households in American is a single person household. Let me say that again. One quarter of American addresses today has only one person living there.

You and I are relational creatures. We become fully human in a network of relationships. We desperately long to belong. We need community the way we need food and shelter. Yet, in our pursuit of a misguided sense of independence and economic opportunity, we have created a society that systematically rips apart human relationships. Yet our need for deep relationship never goes away.

Who are these people who come to our churches by the thousands? They are disconnected people who seek connection. They are looking for relationships with people who share their values. They are starving for true community—for religious community. They are people who are seeking to transcend the soul-destroying banality of consumer society. They want the depth and meaning that comes from being faithful to a vision that transcends their lives. They want to sing together and worship together. They want to join with others to work for change and to bear witness to an image of human life that involves compassion and stewardship of the web of life. Many of our visitors have children. They are searching for a place where kindness, understanding and acceptance are taught—a place to join with others in raising their kids. They know it takes a village to raise a child. They come to us hoping we will be that village.

The seekers who come to our doors every Sunday do not come to debate theology or politics. And they do not even come to find out whether or not they agree with us. We live in an age of the internet. Visitors have already checked us out. Most visitors come already knowing they are in basic agreement with our principles and ideals. I find that many of them have already read sermons on our web site.

The seekers who come to us by the thousands come to see how our church feels to them. The key question is emotional and spiritual, not intellectual. The real question, often not completely articulated in their minds, is: Are these my people? Do I truly belong here?

And what do we do when they arrive at our door? All too often, we treat these seekers very badly. How many of you have visited one or more UU congregations other than your own? How many of you have had the experience of being ignored? Now imagine what it is like for people who are brand new!

We ought to be ashamed of how we treat people.

This is not a matter of good manners. I am not talking about being polite. I am talking about true religious hospitality. I am talking about being truly, honestly, welcoming. I am talking about realizing that each visitor is a vulnerable human being who is reaching out. True hospitality is a spiritual practice. It comes from deep inside. Religious hospitality is more than being superficially friendly. Religious hospitality involves being open to the dreams and the pain of each visitor. Religious hospitality means offering the newcomer the real human connection he or she is seeking.

For you and me to ignore a visitor is the moral equivalent of not feeding the hungry and not housing the homeless. Every Sunday hundreds and thousands come to us seeking a spiritual home. If we do not offer them deep hospitality we have acted immorally. It is wrong. It is sinful.

Eight years ago at my congregation we took an honest look at what a visitor experiences. We thought of ourselves as a friendly church. We talked to people who had come in the previous year. We were taken aback at what we found. We truly wanted to be a warm and inviting place. However, our behavior did not communicate that. We had some very bad habits. And we decided to break those habits.

We started to pay attention. And when we did that we kept seeing things we could change. I preached about how it is everyone's responsibility to create an atmosphere that reflects the warmth in our hearts. It cannot be the job of the minister or the membership committee. On the other hand, leaders need to lead. I make a practice of standing out front and welcoming people as they arrive. It makes a huge difference. It sets a tone and sets an example. If you are a parish minister and you don't greet people as they arrive, start next Sunday. This is not optional. This is a moral obligation.

At Jefferson we put our resources where our values were. We realized the importance of warmth and consistency in our welcoming of new and returning guests. We hired a part time membership coordinator, a woman who is deeply dedicated to our church and who believes deeply in offering a warm welcome. You cannot believe the power of having Annie greet you with a big smile on your second visit and say, "Carol, it is so good to see again." People just melt.

Once people are in the service, just before the call to worship we ask people to greet those around them. This is a good chance for our members to say hello. And it is a wonderful opportunity for our members to greet newcomers. We have a goal at our church. You should be greeted warmly three times in your first ten minutes. Ideally you will have been greeted by the

minister, at the welcome table, and in the service. We want you to feel that we noticed that you came are genuinely glad you did.

And you know what? A good spiritual practice transforms the people who engage in it. Just as the practice of meditation makes us more aware and more at peace, so too the practice of hospitality makes us more open and compassionate. The practice of hospitality has made us more caring, more aware, less self centered.

True hospitality begins with a warm welcome, but it goes far beyond that. A culture of hospitality includes creating a space for the newcomer in the totality of congregational life: in worship, in religious education, in small groups, in social action, in leadership, in music. A true religious hospitality invites the newcomer to share her gifts. A dedicated newcomer should not have to wait ten years to be on the board of trustees or head a committee.

Genuine religious hospitality is not a means to some end. We are not hospitable in order to grow. Genuine openness to others is the practice of our religion just the way seeking social justice is. Ultimately, we grow because we are hospitable. And we are hospitable because we care about all the lonely people who come to us seeking liberal religious community.

Our little movement is in trouble. The numbers should be a wake up call to all of us.

Yet we can change the course of our movement. We can transform our congregations into places where tens of thousands of new people—people just like you and me—find a vital, engaging, transforming religious home.

We don't have to raise millions of dollars. We don't have to mimic religious fads. We just have to let the compassion in our hearts guide our actions. We have to practice our religion.

The answer is religion. It always has been. It always will be.

The spiritually hungry and the religiously homeless come to us every week. They come by the hundreds and the thousands.

Our challenge is to feed the hungry and house the homeless.

May we find the courage and love to do that. The spiritually hungry and the religiously homeless are coming to our churches next Sunday. And every Sunday. They need us. And we need them. Let's reach out to them. And let's start right now.