

The Rites (and Wrongs) of Passage: Closing the Back Door



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Here's what we'll cover today...

- So what's the problem?
- Why are people leaving our congregations?
- Focus on youth and young adults
- Why retain members?
- 10 ways to keep members from walking out the back door
- Strategies for bringing them back
- Resources and readings



Here's the big picture

- An estimated 35 million Americans have left organized religion in recent years.

American Religious Identification Survey
(2008)

- More than one-quarter of American adults (28%) have left the faith in which they were raised in favor of another religion...or no religion at all.

- People moving into the unaffiliated category (no religion) outnumber those moving out of the unaffiliated group by more than a three-to-one margin.

U.S. Religious Landscape Survey
Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2008)

What about UUs?

- ✓ Adult membership in the UUA has declined for the second consecutive year. Total adult membership is 155,748, down from 156,015 a year ago (-.16%).
- ✓ Religious education enrollment and average Sunday attendance also declined slightly.
- ✓ For comparison purposes...
 - Southern Baptist Convention -.24 percent;
 - United Methodist Church -.98 percent;
 - Episcopal Church -2.81;
 - United Church of Christ -2.93.



“The rites of passage by which people become members of religious communities are well known. The rites of passage by which people leave remain unexplored.”

“We do not know precisely what triggers the exodus for some and what holds others in. The indications seem to suggest that for most the process of estrangement is gradual.”

James Russell Hale

Why do people leave our congregations?



Contextual (related to the environment or otherwise external to the congregation)

- Relocating
- Death or serious illness
- The economy
- Change in work schedule
- Transportation problems
- Accessibility issues
- Too many other obligations

Top ten reasons why people switched churches

- 📁 The church was not helping me to develop spiritually (28%)
- 📄 I did not feel engaged or involved in meaningful church work (20%)
- 📋 Church members were judgmental of others (18%)
- 📖 Pastor was not a good preacher (16%)
- 📅 Too many changes (16%)

Top ten reasons why people switched churches

6. Members seemed hypocritical (15%)

 Church didn't seem to be a place where God was at work (14%)

 Church was run by a clique that discouraged involvement (14%)

 Pastor was judgmental of others (14%)

 Pastor seemed hypocritical (13%)

LifeWay Christian Resources (2006)

People leave for a variety of reasons



Gee, what a brilliant statement. Now why didn't I think of that? "People leave for a variety of reasons." Wow! I'm really learning something now. How much did I pay for this webinar???

Spiritual/Emotional

Practical

Social

Spiritual/Emotional

- I don't feel that the congregation is meeting my spiritual needs.
- I don't feel committed to this Unitarian Universalist faith.
- I don't have a clear understanding of my Unitarian Universalist identity.
- I'm not moved or inspired by the minister, the worship service, or the faith based programming.

Practical

- The minister left
- My kid isn't coming to church anymore
- I can never find a parking space
- My spouse or significant other is not a member and I need to pay more attention to him/her on Sundays
- I don't find the educational offerings to be relevant or interesting

Social

- I don't feel loved, accepted or wanted by other members of this congregation.
- I don't feel that I am contributing in any way to this congregation.
- I'm contributing too much to this congregation and no one appreciates it.
- I am in conflict with the minister or with a lay leader in the congregation.
- I used to have a best friend here, but we had a falling out and we don't speak to each other anymore.
- I am a person of color/gay/older/younger/single/divorced and I don't feel I fit in.

Results of Staff Satisfaction Survey

I am proud to work for the agency.

The agency treats me like a person, not a number

I feel I am valued at the agency.

I have confidence in the leadership of the agency.

I feel I can trust what the agency tells me

A few words about youth retention

- Church members are likely to drop out between the ages of 18 and 22.
- They leave because they “need a break from church” or because they leave for college or career.
- An Assemblies of God study showed a loss of 66% of their students within one year of high school graduation.
- A Southern Baptist transition project estimates an 82% loss of youth within one year of high school graduation.
- Fifty to eighty percent of high school students walk away.

Source: Why Teens are Leaving in Droves, Rebecca Grace, AFA Journal, May 2008

Declaration of Retention



Actual Board Meeting of the
First Unitarian Church of
Wilmington, DE.

First,

A congregation must be intentional about retaining its members. It should be stated as a specific goal of the congregation and publicized throughout the membership.

Second,

If the congregation is to be intentional, it must be clear on why it wants to retain its membership. If, for example, the congregation is interested in growth because it needs more money to support the work of the church, than when those members who did not provide significant financial support leave the congregation, they will not be pursued.

The reasons for retaining members should be the same as for attracting visitors and new members. It should come out of the mission statement, the vision statement, the covenant of right relations. It should stem from our principles which hold that every life is precious and that when one member leaves, it diminishes the entire community.

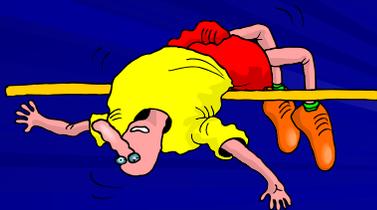
To put it another way, the reasons for closing the back door should be the same as the reasons for opening the front door.

So...how you gonna keep em down on the farm?



 Raise the bar for membership.

Don't rush the membership process. Provide and even require opportunities for prospective members to sample congregational life and to discover what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist.



- Evidence shows that when you "raise the bar" for membership, it is more likely to "stick." When becoming a member is as simple as signing the book, you may get lots of people doing it, but fewer who stay around and become deeply involved. We want people to have at least a basic understanding of what Unitarian Universalism is all about before they make a commitment to it. If they are unwilling to commit three hours to learning about who we are, where we come from, etc., I would say that their commitment is rather shaky to begin with and their motives for membership suspect.

We are not looking just to add names to our membership rolls. We are looking for new members who are prepared to make an informed and meaningful commitment to our faith.

We are hoping that this requirement will offer people that opportunity and help to "close the back door" that is one of the more significant reasons that we don't grow -- people leaving as fast as they're joining us.

Rev. Peter Friedrichs
Unitarian Universalist Church of Delaware County

- "Growing churches are churches where high expectations and serious commitment are the norm. If we are to grow our UU churches for the future of our movement, we need to heed this call...In my experience, casual commitment to membership translates into indifferent support for the church in all areas from volunteerism to financial support. Serious commitment, I have discovered, usually translates into real involvement at all levels. This kind of commitment and involvement eventually evolves into more active and engaging congregations. And active and engaging congregations attract people."

Rev. Barbara Wells ten Hove

 Offer a variety of small group opportunities for members to explore UU ideas and ideals.

Invite members to participate in Small Group Ministry or faith development classes such as UU101, Building Your Theology and Tapestry of Faith and continue to offer life changing experiences that enable members of the congregation to discover their Unitarian Universalist identity.



And Don't Neglect Your
Children's Religious Education
Program Either



Expand pastoral care to include non-ministerial lay leaders in order to meet the personal and emotional needs of a greater number of congregants.



Ensure meaningful and varied worship services that speak to the needs of the congregation, that celebrate wonderful music, and that involve aspects of church life.



 Involve members in the life of the congregation according to their gifts and preferences.

Accountability is the willingness to acknowledge that we have participated in creating...the conditions that we wish to see changed. Community will be created the moment we decide to act as creators of what it can become.
Peter Block



 Create a culture of acknowledgement and gratitude.

- Include in newsletter or online digest.
- Post on bulletin boards in the lobby or in inserts in orders of service.
- Hold an annual *thank you for your gifts* luncheon.

 Manage conflict, don't ignore it.



Three types of goals that compete with one another within congregations.

- the goals that people have for themselves
- the personal goals that individuals have for the congregation
- the goals of the congregation as a whole

Conflict develops when these goals become contradictory or mutually exclusive.

8. Check your attitude toward those members who become inactive

How “actives” see “inactives”

- Dropouts
- Delinquents
- Do-nothings
- Lazy
- Backsliders
- Complainers
- Excuse makers

How “actives” feel

- Frustrated
- Fearful
- Anxious
- Worried
- Hostile
- Suspicious
- Sympathetic
- Puzzled
- Embarrassed

How “inactives” see “actives

- Hypocrites
- Do-gooders
- Nosy
- Fussy
- Nitpickers
- Bossy
- “in-group”
- High and mighty
- Meddlers
- Cliquish

How “inactives” feel

- Condemned
- Forgotten
- Lonely
- Rejected
- Abandoned
- Angry
- Suspicious
- Having failed
- Apathetic
- No longer caring

Gerhard Knutson, Ministry to the Inactives

Some assumptions that “actives” need to make when thinking about “inactives”

-  Every person who joined the church did so in good faith
-  The inactive member has a good reason for being inactive
-  The inactive member will continue to be in that status until this reason has been dealt with
-  The most direct way to identify the reason for inactivity is to ask the inactive member
-  Our approach to the inactive member should be one of “active listening”
-  The longer we wait for this process to begin, the harder it is to return the inactive member to the congregation

 Maintain constant contact with members through phone calls, surveys, email and face to face conversation.



 Develop a method for tracking, identifying and reaching out to members who have become inactive or who have left the congregation.



Exit Interview Processes

(1) Letter

Dear _____:

My name is _____, and I recently became chair of the Unitarian Universalist Church of _____ Membership Committee. As a fairly new member, I wanted to better understand why people joined - and just as important, why they left.

As a former member, you are in a unique position to address both questions. We would be very grateful if you would be willing to talk to one of our committee members sometime during the week of November 10. We will be asking the following questions:

What attracted you to UUC of _____? Why did you decide to join?

Did you feel welcome at UU of _____? Why or why not?

Why did you decide to leave UU _____? Have you found another church home yet? Which one?

How could we have responded to your needs better?

If you prefer to respond by email or mail, or do not want to be contacted, I can be reached by phoning _____, emailing _____ or mailing _____.

We sincerely appreciate any insight you might provide. Thank you.

Sincerely,

_____, Membership Chair

(2) Exit Interview by Phone

Hello, my name is _____ and I am calling from the Unitarian Universalist Church of _____, s

We are trying to better understand why members have left UUC of _____. Would you have a few minutes to answer a few short questions?

No: Would there be a better time?

Yes: Thank you. I know your time is valuable. I really appreciate your willingness to do this.

What attracted you to UUC of _____?

Why did you decide to join?

Did you initially feel welcome at UUC of _____? YES _____ Why? NO _____ Why not?

Did you feel like part of the UUC of _____ community during your time at the church? YES _____ Why? NO _____ Why not?

Why did you decide to leave UUC of _____?

– (Probe) What else?

– Was there anything else that disappointed you about UUC of _____?

Have you found another church home yet? YES _____ Which one? NO _____

In thinking back, how could we have responded to your needs better?

Is there anything else we should know to help make UUC of _____ more responsive to people?

Would you recommend UUC of _____ to a friend or family member? YES _____ Why? NO _____ Why not?

A faith community is one of the few places where casual interchanges between young and old can take place, where familiarity breeds appreciation rather than contempt. Faith communities keep us aware of and in conversation about our core values as we move through life and struggle with what it means each day to live with courage, generosity and grace.

Michael A. Schuler, *Making the Good Life Last*

For your reading pleasure...

- ✓ Behavioral Covenants in Congregations. Gilbert R. Rendle, 1999, The Alban Institute.
- ✓ Close the Back Door. Alan F. Harre, 1984, Concordia Publishing House.
- ✓ Community: The Structure of Belonging. Peter Block, 2008, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
- ✓ Making the Good Life Last. Michael A. Schuler, 2009, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
- ✓ Salted with Fire. Scott W. Alexander, 1994, Skinner House Books.