

Gathering For Growth, 21st September, 2013 @ Kingswood Unitarian Church

This was a well attended and vibrant session, led by the Rev Ant Howe from Kingswood Unitarian Church. Ant's congregation is 'successful' by any description-with Unitarian worship at its heart it attracts 60+ attendees on a typical Sunday, 40 at mid week services, is growing at the rate of 10 % per year, has a full schedule of activities, is inclusive, welcoming, and at the heart of the local community it so effectively serves. At Christmas, it is standing room only!

Ant led a sequence of discussions about 'growth' as summarised below. Neither Ant nor the course participants would claim to have all of the answers to this issue. It is hoped though that this brief report of Ant's thoughts and the views of the group may stimulate further thought and response, and perhaps inspire others in their quest to grow Unitarianism

1. Start By Asking-Why Grow ?

To enable others to share the joyous message of our wonderful liberal Unitarian faith. We should see this almost as a 'duty'. We should therefore be 'firing up' our communities to share with us in the Unitarian message.

From this initial intention growth strategies will arise, have meaning, and stand a better chance of success.

We must be clear therefore about Unitarian 'truths', and be prepared to offer those who may join us a route to follow, at least initially. There will inevitably be different pathways to personal spiritual growth, together with a tolerance and understanding of such, but there must also be a framework that we can use to describe 'what we offer'. We need to be on a 'mission' to find those future congregations.

Work out who we are trying to attract ? We should try to answer this question with respect to the community we serve. A scattergun approach will not work.

Some examples of what has 'worked' at Kingswood were outlined. Ant was at pains to point out that there were many things that hadn't worked out; this is inevitable and should be expected. The following however provide a flavour of some of the approaches that have enabled the Kingswood community to grow;

- Keep accurate data on attendance at all events (not just Sunday), and contact those who seem to have 'missed' their regular pattern of attendance-a pleasant card asking if they're OK, a telephone call, and so on.
- Professionalism in all aspects of worship, including leadership, readings, music and service literature.
- Regular 'special services' to cater for and attract as wide a variety of audience as possible.
- Regular events in the building for the community, from which it may be possible to attract (by conversation and friendship for example) new members to a service. A Tuesday Coffee Morning (quality coffee), Monthly Bereavement Group, Rainbows, Brownies, Guides, Women's League, Social Event, Art Club and so on, were some of the examples that take place in this respect.

- Outreach, both by Ministerial Leaders and Lay Groups within the congregation. Serve the community. Kingswood's ministry touches approximately four times the number of people who attend the Sunday Service each week.
- Rites of Passage; undertaking these as broadly as possible and advertising that fact has been a significant element in the growth story at Kingswood.
- Offer spiritual support other than via a Sunday service. At Kingswood this includes a Lunchtime Service twice per month attended by 40 people, many of whom may not set foot in the traditional `Sunday Service` but for whom Kingswood is their spiritual home.
- Encourage people `to do`; if they have ideas, set them free (with at least one helper !) to try them out. Don't necessarily hamper an enthusiast by encouraging them onto a committee. The latter can deal with finance, administration and policy. Let others `loose` on the creative stuff.
- Effective use of media of all types is important, but the most significant messenger for Kingswood has been each individual who has `spread the message` or invited friends. Becoming `known` in the community for worship, works and actions, via this route, is by far the most important way of making an impact.

What Are The Dangers and Barriers ?

There are always `Discomforting Points`. The following have happened across the Unitarian spectrum (and elsewhere !) and some were very familiar to those in attendance ! ;

- Overcoming `traditional ways` of doing things that may be resistant to growth (for example those who may say, "but we've always done it this way")
- Cliques
- Trying to keep track of names as the community grows.
- Bad Music. Joyless celebration.
- Wavering from professional and well thought-out presentation and leadership of worship. How would this appear to a visitor ?
- Individuals using their `weaknesses` to dominate.
- Punishing those who may be present for those who aren't; e.g, "What a shame there are so few of us here today". Always be positive.
- Using the phrase "That's not very Unitarian" to object to a suggestion.
- Disruptive behaviour and antagonism; this can arise in congregations and be difficult to challenge. Having a procedure in place via the Constitution, together with an appropriate policy, can enable difficult situations to be fairly managed.
- Forgetting that worship, spirituality, prayer, silence, the quality of the address, are central to `what we stand for`
- The potential to `over-intellectualise`, leaving little guidance on how the content of a service or discussion may actually affect everyday life. Associated with this is the occasional tendency to spend too much time dwelling in the past. Respect and celebrate our treasured heritage `yes`, but rejoice in how it helps us to serve the `present` and the `future`.
- Unitarian `politics`.

Apologetics

As Unitarians we need to have `answers` not `apologies` to the question `what is a Unitarian`. We need to be able to articulate this (as a community, as a group, as an individual) in order to confidently engage with those who may ask it, and who therefore may join us. We should never convey that we are happy to `believe anything`, and whilst we respect different routes to an individual's spiritual journey, that individual may nevertheless reasonably require that we are confident enough in our own Unitarian beliefs to at least support them. Our attitude to Unitarianism and its theology, will almost certainly subsequently help guide our attitude and work with social action.

We must not let our liberality distract us from the big questions of life and death, why are we here, what is the purpose, and what is our spirituality ?

From dreams to reality: planning

The session closed with a sharing of ideas about the way forward in each of the congregations represented. The desire was also expressed that we continue to share not only our dreams, but the practical outcomes of our planning. We can all learn from each other as we strive to serve and grow those `beloved communities`.

Thanks

This was an excellent and uplifting day for all concerned, superbly led by Ant and conducted in a spirit of optimism and joyfulness. We look forward to the continued sharing of positive and realistic strategies for growing our congregations.

Useful Texts:

Antagonists In The Church: Kenneth Haugk

The Growing Church: Thom Belote

Purpose Driven Church: Rick Warren

Beyond Church Growth: Robert E Logan

Growing The Beloved Community: Tom Owen-Towle.