

# **New Wine, New Wineskins: The Future of Mission and Witness**

## **The Rev. Suzanne Meyer**

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When Jesus used the metaphor of the necessity of putting new wine in new wineskins, he spoke of what we moderns commonly call a paradigm shift-- the recognition that the models which worked well in the past have made obsolete by the changes which are rapidly taking place in our culture. The future of liberal religious mission and witness demands attention to this paradigm shift.

“New occasions teach new duties; time makes ancient good uncouth. We must onward move and upward, who would keep abreast of truth.” Unitarian James Russell Lowell penned those words over 150 years ago, but they could have been written today to accurately describe the state of contemporary Unitarian Universalism. As a denomination and a culture we are in the midst of a change, some would even say upheaval. Two words might be said to characterize the current state of our Unitarian Universalist congregations: pain and potential.

New wine requires new wineskins. New occasions teach new duties. The new occasion is the current unprecedented opportunity for congregation growth we are now facing. We have a rare window for congregational growth for expanding our numbers and for increasing our diversity. The new duties are the changes that are taking place and must continue to take place within our congregations if we are to take full advantage of this growth potential.

Congregational growth can be exciting and energizing. It can also be disturbing, confusing, painful, and even threatening to long-time members who feel that their church or fellowship is changing in ways they are not prepared or willing to accept. New wine, new wineskins; new occasions, new duties; new ways of conceptualizing our mission, new ways of bearing witness to our faith; new pain and great potential.

For many of our congregations, growing pains may involve expanding that physical space to accommodate more adults and children, or expanding from one weekly worship service to two or more, but for every one of our congregations, growth will involve opening ourselves up to the kinds of changes a different generation of Unitarian Universalists will bring with them. Growth means expanding our emotional and spiritual space to reach out and welcome new seekers and to welcome the changes that they will bring. This is not always easy. Growth is one of those issues that most of our congregations affirm in the abstract, but often when growth becomes actualized and our congregations begin to respond to the needs and desires of new members, long-timers may feel excluded or discounted.

But here's the potential. For the first time in a long time there is a sizable population out there of men and women between the ages of 30 and 50, many of whom are already predisposed to many of the things that characterize our brand of liberal religion. Quoting an article by journalist Geoffrey Stokes in the May 1993 issue of the Boston Globe: “Since 1980, enrollment in mainline Protestant Churches has dropped precipitously,

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but adult UU membership has increased 10%. More significant, the number of children enrolled in UU Sunday schools is up by 40% while mainline Sunday schools suffered a 55% decline during a similar period.

Some would say, borrowing the language of the demographics, that it's the pig passing through the python. A few years back, the baby boomers, that post WWII population bugle, prompted at least in part by concerns about their children's moral and ethical education, began to consider the Sunday school option, greatly increasing the number of potential churchgoers.

But if it were just demographics, all Protestant churches would be growing in proportion - and they're not. Nor is it simply that the growth of Unitarian Universalism represents a widespread rejection of orthodoxy. (If that were so, fundamentalist churches would not have grown so explosively over the past the decades.) Nor are the historical and family patterns that dictate church allegiance operating with their traditional force.

So, for an entire generation, religion has become more of a choice, less of an inheritance, and boomers typically visit a number of churches before deciding which one offers the right social and theological fit. This is basically a kind of shopping - something boomers are good at - and as Newsweek magazine put it in a 1991 cover story, "The quintessential boomer church may well be the Unitarian Universalist Association."

In short, there 76 million men and women out there between their early 30's and their early 50's, the product of the post-World War II Baby Boom, many of whom are unchurched or dropouts from their parents' religion, who are looking for something to help them make sense out of their lives and out of life issues such as suffering and death, or life crises such as divorce, addiction, and codependency. Although many were exposed to Sunday school as children, most have never had an adult relationship with a church. Many are raising children in a world that appears to be growing more vulgar and violent. Many of those have described what they are looking in terms such as spirituality, community, soul, transcendence, serenity, hope, roots, and even God. Many of them may not know exactly what they are seeking but they know that they don't want a lot of traditional religious doctrine, moralism, authoritarianism, or sectarianism.

So it should come as no surprise to us that in the December 17, 1991 issue of Newsweek, Unitarian Universalism was described as the quintessential baby boomer church because of our emphasis on the individual as the principal locus of authority, our lack of dogma, our pluralistic approach to spirituality, and our egalitarianism, all of which seems to be in line with existing baby boomer values. Additional aspects that attract baby boomers to Unitarian Universalism include our emphasis on social justice and our openness to theological as well as social issues that directly affect women as well as gay men and lesbians.

If Newsweek is right and we are the quintessential baby boomer church what does all of this mean for our communities of faith? Do our openness, flexibility, and tolerance

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make us the ideal religious for spiritual seekers who are still leery of organized religion? Sunday morning attendance is up in our churches all over the country and RE enrollment is high. But many long-time UU's regard this influx of baby boomers, and baby busters, as a mixed blessing at least.

The presence of a greater number of Boomers in our congregations can be a simultaneous boon and a threat to those long-time members who were born in the decades prior to 1945. The Baby Busters, also known as Generation X, those born after 1964, men and women now in their late 20's and early 30's, also present a different set of challenges than their Boomer parents.

Why? Why do Boomers and Busters threaten the status quo? Because when these three generational groups meet three radically different world views collide. The world view of those born after 1957 is substantially different from the world view of those born before that date. And the experiences of those born in the midst of the 1960's are very different from those of their parents and grandparents. The social upheavals and rapid changes that have characterized the period following the Great Depression and WWII have made the gaps between generations deeper. What 'worked' to attract members to our congregations in the '50's, '60's, and '70's won't work now.

The events that shaped the expectations of those born before 1947 were the Great Depression and WWII. The events that shaped the lives of those 1947 were the events of the 1960's, the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the women's movement. The changes have had their greatest impact as the Baby Busters, children of the Boomers, have been closer to home. They were the first generation to experience on a large scale the impact of the rising divorce rate, joint custody, mothers on career tracks, and blended families. More than that were latchkey children who came home from school every day to an empty house. These factors directly shape what Boomers and Busters want and expect from a church community.

Although it may be a bit of an overgeneralization, the majority of UU's born before 1945 were 'come-outers,' those who left a church of another denomination for intellectual or ideological reasons. They came to Unitarian Universalism seeking freedom of religion and in some cases, freedom from religion. They were looking for a religious tradition that was intellectual, scientific, socially progressive, pragmatic, objective, and unemotional. They left behind what they called the empty rituals, the emotionalism, the dogmatism, the supernaturalism, the pie-in-the-sky promises of their former faiths. And the style of Unitarian Universalism they experienced in our congregations in the 1950's and 1960's met their needs.

The majority of Baby Boomers are 'come-inners,' those who, while they may have been exposed to church and Sunday school as young children, were virtually unchurched as adults. Boomers come to church seeking and expecting spiritual nurture and direction. Unlike past generations who discovered Unitarian Universalism on a journey away from

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orthodox or fundamentalistic religions, these new seekers are coming in to a religious community as an alternative to the empty values of secular life. As my colleague Arvid Straube writes: “Unlike the traditional potential converts to Unitarian Universalism of past decades, these people tend not to be fresh refugees from more orthodox religions. They do not need to rebel. They are not looking for a refuge from Methodism but from secularism, hedonism, and consumerism.” They’ve had all that science and psychology that the human potential movement had to offer them. They had a taste of the excesses of rugged individualism, and the highly mobile society, and long to be able to find community. They’ve lived in their heads most of their lives and they want somethings that speaks to their souls, their hearts, their emotions, and not just to their intellects. Their tastes are wide-ranging and eclectic, and embrace both traditional religious symbols as well as New Age philosophies. Many have even had experience in the addiction and recovery movements and come to church as part of their struggle for sobriety. Most say that their return to church was prompted by a desire find religious education for their children, but in truth they seek spiritual guidance for themselves as well. They are not running away from organized religion; they are running away from the empty values of secular culture. The impact of the phenomenon alone cannot be discounted or underestimated in our congregations. We no longer the counterculture to orthodoxy or fundamentalism. We are the counterculture to secular materialism. For the first time in our history as a movement, we do not exist [just] as a liberal alternative to conservative religion but as a religious alternative to the empty values of our culture.

The Baby Busters, the children of parents who came of age in the 1960’s, were virtually unchurched, even as children. They are facing their very real fears for the future with little or no religious experience, good or bad, from which to draw. The search for intimacy, for community, and for acceptance, is a driving force in their lives. They fear for the future, and believe that the traditional American dream is already beyond their grasp. Everything out there seems broken. The economy seems beyond repair. The environment is in crisis. Busters know they’ll have to pay for the national debt and Social Security of the generation that handed it to them, and they feel angry about that. Paradoxically, in the midst of this nearly hopeless outlook, Busters are trying to create hope on a local scale. They want to put their life into something that will make a difference.

The first place this conflict of values and expectations between those born before 1945 and the Boomers is likely to occur in a UU congregations is over the content and style of the Sunday morning worship service. What UU’s born before 1945 say they want most in Sunday morning service is intellectual stimulation. They prefer sermons that deal with ideas, concepts, and current issues. They like a style of presentation that is objective, detached, and emotionally neutral. They don’t like anything that feels to them like formalism, emotionalism, or ritual. And many react negatively to what they call ‘God talk’: theistic language in the service even if it is used poetically or metaphorically. All of this talk of spirituality makes them a little nervous. They associate what they call ‘God talk’ with a

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return to orthodoxy. They have a difficult time understanding why language and rituals they rejected so long ago might speak to the needs of the new generation of religious liberals. Those born before 1945 prefer, or have at least grown accustomed to, a style of Sunday service that is informal, loosely structured, not liturgical, and often lay-lead. They prefer their music classical and meditative and recorded music suits them fine. They like a rousing talkback afterwards in which the issues presented are debated back and forth. They want stimulation, intellectual challenge, and lively discussion.

In sharp contrast, those born after 1945 say that the thing they want most of all on Sunday morning is celebration and spiritual renewal. They prefer sermons that deal with feelings, personal dilemmas, life passages, and spiritual growth. They are comfortable with a style of presentation that is subjective, warm, and vibrant. They are comfortable with 'God talk' and are interested in prayer, guided meditation, and Bible study. They want comfort more than stimulation, and reassurance more than argumentation.

Those born after 1945 generally prefer a worship service that is fast-paced, tightly-formatted, and professionally-led. They like liturgical worship which they call ritual. Baby Boomers prefer music that is contemporary, uptempo, singable, and live. Worship should be celebrative as well as spiritually enriching.

Although the conflict over the style and content of the Sunday worship service may be couched in terms of the old 'humanists vs. theists' debate, it is really a conflict that has less to do with theology or 'God talk' and much more to do with the experiences, needs, and expectations of these very different generations.

According to Charles Gaines, former director of our Extension Department: "The new joiners are much more willing to experiment than our older members were. For the first time, looking at young adults who were born in the 60's and 70's, we're seeing a large group of people who were brought up unchurched. They come to us with no established behaviors and with not need to distance themselves from, or get even with, their childhood religions. In fact they're looking for some of the same things our older members were fleeing.

"So the congregations that are growing have had to change. If a congregation adapts a rigid party line, it will be less welcoming to the diversity we affirm.

"You know that for years and years, there were many congregations where you simply couldn't use the word god or spiritual ... but if we're going to be a significant and vital faith in the year 2025, when the demographics change again, we have to respond. I want to empathize with the older members, but I also want to create a life-giving faith for our children and grandchildren."

Those UU congregations that are currently growing are those congregations that blend the emotional and the spiritual with the intellectual to create worship services that differ markedly from the dry lecture followed by discussion format that used to characterize many UU churches.

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For the small to medium-size church, growth itself may be an underlying source of conflict between old-timers and newcomers. Many of those born before 1945 grew up in small towns and attended small public schools, maybe even one-room schoolhouses. They were acculturated to the small homogeneous group and feel uncomfortable in larger, more diverse, and more impersonal groups. They prefer the intimacy and informality of the small church. A surge of new faces and names, as well as the changes growth brings, feels disturbing and overwhelming to those who were originally drawn to UU'ism by the promise of an intimate, causal group of friends who would all pitch in to share the responsibilities of a small congregation. When a critical mass of newcomers appears, long-timers often complain: "Who are all these people? Where did they come from? I don't even recognize their names?" What the long-timers may mean is, "None of these new people know my name or recognize the ways I have contributed to this congregation over the years. They don't respect me and my opinion so why should I be in favor of growth. The intimacy and extended family feeling of my congregation is gone. Suddenly it seems so impersonal and institutional."

In contrast, many Baby Boomers attended large, overcrowded public schools in the 1960's and 70's, as well as large impersonal state universities, and consequently feel at home in large groups. In fact, they seek out large groups for the variety of activities and relationships they offer. Boomers are less threatened by diversity and by individuals whose lifestyles are different from their own. They often accuse longtime members of trying to be gatekeepers or of trying to hang to the institution or trying to block necessary changes.

Sunday worship is not the only aspect of church life in which those born before 1945 may come into conflict with Baby Boomers and Baby Busters. Volunteerism, fundraising, and social justice are other areas in which the differing styles of these generations seem to collide.

Those individuals who came of age during the Great Depression and WWII have a finely-honed sense of duty, obligation, institutional loyalty, and a willingness to make personal sacrifices for the common good. They act out of a sense of duty and responsibility. These individuals are the institutional stalwarts, that backbones of most of our congregations. Those born before 1945 respond to requests for volunteers and money when the request is couched in these terms: We've all got to pitch in and make a sacrifice to keep Old First Church afloat one more year.

Baby Boomers who came of age during Vietnam and Watergate mistrust institutions. One fear they have about returning to church is the fear that all churches want from them is their money. They seek personal fulfillment and community. They have a consumer orientation and are only willing to give their time and money to a successful organization that will benefit them in the long run. They act out of a desire for personal growth and fulfillment. Don't bother to ask for their time and money using words like duty, loyalty, sacrifice, or obligation. A better way to approach Baby Boomers for the gift of their time

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and their money is to attach the appeal to opportunities for fellowship and personal growth. Volunteerism is a good way to meet new people, make friends, and explore new skills and interests. By helping the church you are helping yourself.

Busters, on the other hand, like hands-on, grassroots projects close to home. They want to become leaders, and yet they have a natural suspicion of anyone trying to lead them somewhere. They want to succeed, and yet many are paralyzed by a fear of failure. In all volunteer efforts, they must be reassured that if they fail, they will not meet with rejection. They so long for relationship that what previous generations would consider normal conflict or anticipated give-and-take, seems to Busters to be infighting and divisiveness. When confronted with conflict, Busters just tend to drift away. It is worth noting that Baby Busters react very negatively to the common UU practice of Baptist-bashing, or putting down other churches in a smug, self-important manner. Having had little or no personal exposure to organized religion, they likewise have no particular feelings towards other groups. They do, however, have very strong feelings against bashing, or putting down other groups.

If you are doing an 'every member' canvass, a good rule to follow is to send Boomers to canvass Boomers, long-time members to canvass long-time members, and Busters to canvass Busters, because the ways to approach these groups is quite different.

Social justice, social concerns is a common issue that unites both long-time UU's and newcomers. This is good because it provides a common ground. Both groups say that they want a religion that is active and influential in the struggle for justice and a more humane society. But again, generational differences may cause conflict. As Rev. Straube writes, "Baby Boomers yearn to serve and to share. Many, however, have not the slightest idea on how to go about it. They tend to not like the traditional UU approach of exhaustive analysis of social problems followed by letters to the editor, to legislators, or perhaps the drafting of a General Assembly resolution. They do not see themselves as 'engaging in social action.' They see themselves as wanting to share and to serve. This too is part of the spiritual quest, for the spiritual worldview insists that we are one with all humanity and with the earth. Our relationship with each other and the earth is inseparable from spiritual practice. This does not mean that we will never write letters, but there is a pronounced preference for hands-on service." In other words, while long-time UU's say they want to understand the social problems and prefer forums and discussion groups, newcomers want hands-on service to the needy. They prefer to do volunteer work in a soup kitchen or building a Habitat for Humanity house. Long-timers call service projects 'band-aid measures' while newcomers say they prefer action to talk. Busters don't like debating an issue; it seems too much like fighting to them, but they are energetic volunteers for hands-on projects, especially those that are more relationship rather than task-oriented.

Whether it is worship and the conflict is couched in terms of intellectual stimulation versus spiritual nourishment, or over volunteerism and the argument involves the values of

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duty versus self-fulfillment, or over congregational size and the conflicting need for intimacy versus diversity and variety, or over social justice and discussion versus action, these generational conflicts exist at some level in all of our growing congregations. But unless we recognize them for what they are - a generational difference - we will not be able to address these issues and work with the differing needs and expectations of long-time, loyal members as well as newcomers.

There is a level of urgency here. Our window of opportunity will not remain open for much longer. The Baby Boomer bulge will move on and their primary motivation for seeking a religious community - their children - will likewise move beyond Sunday school-age. Congregations that want to grow must make changes now, if they want to attract and maintain Baby Boomers.

The average congregation has a lifetime of twenty-five years. If the average age of the members of your congregation is over fifty-five, your congregation may already be on the brink of irreversible decline. I am convinced that there are only two kinds of UU congregations: the ones that growing and actively pursuing growth, and those that are unconcerned about growth and hence are actively pursuing death. If your current membership is not up, if your Sunday morning attendance is not increasing, if your RE enrollment is not up, your congregation may already be in the throes of an irreversible death spiral. And I say to long-time members who are resistant to the changes that growth necessitates: **don't love your church or fellowship so much that you want to take it with you to your grave.**

I want to conclude by very quickly listing some of the things that growing congregations are doing to attract new members. All of these ideas can be found in this new Skinner House book entitled *Salted With Fire: Unitarian Universalist Strategies for Sharing Faith and Growing Congregations*. One way to evaluate your own congregation is to see how many of these things you are already doing. These are in no particular order or priority.

1. Attract and keep members by making it hard to become a member and stay a member. It seems paradoxical, but the more you require of your members in terms of mandatory financial and volunteer commitment, the more membership in your church or fellowship will mean. Do you say to new members that to be a UU all one has to do is sign the book? Or do you hold inquirer's classes for potential members in which you carefully explain the responsibilities and obligations of membership? Growing churches make serious demands on their members. They have high expectations and they are seldom disappointed. Boomers and Busters respond to requests for serious commitment.
2. Growing churches remember these numbers: twenty-four/seven/twelve. Church and RE should be twelve month-a-year institutions. Growing churches do not shut down during the summer months but have high-quality worship services and children's programming year-round. In fact, pro-growth churches recognize that

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new families moving to town in time to enroll their children in school in September church-shop in August and therefore growing congregations plan special seeker services during August. If your church shuts down or offers less-attractive programming during those months when the regulars are not around as much, you are encouraging newcomers - especially those with children - to go elsewhere.

3. Growing churches have more than one worship service per week. Whether it is a second service on Sunday morning or a mid-week service followed by adult RE, growing churches place an emphasis on high-quality worship. Every single Sunday of the year is an important Sunday.
4. Whether it is led by the minister or by members of the worship committee, all worship services should be of the highest quality in both content and format. A Sunday service that may feel loose, informal, easy-going, and laid-back to long-time members, may seem sloppy, disorganized, and careless to first-time visitors. Congregations where fifteen minutes of coded announcements proceed the service are turning off visitors. By coded announcements I mean those couched in 'insider language,' such as RE, UUSC, UUA, SWUUSI, APF, etc.

Quality, quality, quality: Baby Boomers are discriminating and demanding. Worship should be celebratory, aesthetically pleasing, and well-organized. The sanctuary should be clean, comfortable, and well-decorated. The service itself should be lively, and well-paced from start to finish. Newcomers are not drawn back to a worship service that begins with fifteen minutes of announcements, or a lengthy explanation of the Building & Grounds committee's concern about the leaky roof or backed-up cesspool, or a sharing of joys and concerns that involves a lot of insider language as well. Opportunities for what are characteristically fellowship styles of worship work better on a Wednesday night than a Sunday morning. Let the Sunday morning service be geared to newcomers.

5. Music, music, music: Surprise! UU's can sing. Growing churches have live, lively, and singable music in worship. For the small congregation, better to have a good singer leading lively hymns on a guitar than the Philadelphia Symphony on CD.
6. Look at the physical plant- check your restrooms and your nursery. Both should be spotless. The nursery should be bright, clean, sweet-smelling, and have new, attractive toys.
7. Evangelize our children. Our RE programs should emphasize what UU's believe and why we want our children to follow in our faith. We have taught them about sex, Buddhism, photosynthesis, and dinosaurs, so isn't it about time we taught them about Unitarian Universalism and why we think it is important for them to remain involved in our churches as young adults?
8. Spiritual growth. Churches that are growing offer adults mediation groups, study groups, 12-step groups, support groups for people living with cancer, AIDS, or other debilitating illnesses, yoga groups, etc- all of them designed to help

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unchurched individuals develop a mature adult spirituality. Many newcomers ease into church through the back door, like a study group or a support group with an overt spiritual emphasis. Only later do they come in the front door on Sunday morning. We've got to make sure that the back door is wide open.

9. Service projects. Growing churches involve their members and attract new members through hands-on service projects. Baby Boomers want to find avenues to express their compassion. Whether it's a soup kitchen, a tutoring program, or a Habitat House, growing churches have community projects going on all the time. Growing churches have a sense of mission that extends beyond the needs of their members.
10. Growing churches want to grow. They believe that they have something good and exciting and important to offer just about anybody, and they are willing to tell their friends about it. Members of growing churches can't wait to bring their friends to their place of worship. They know that the beautiful, clean building, the high-quality worship service, the attractive RE space, and the excellent program are worthy of their pride. And members of growing congregations are not inhibited about making it clear to new members that they expect a great deal from those who enter that sacred space.

Finally: Growing churches define themselves in a positive way. They do not assume that newcomers had to reject or will reject anything before discovering UU'ism. Growing congregations don't bash the Baptists or put down the Presbyterians. They know how to tell their story, make their witness in a positive, affirming way. Growing churches identify with what they do believe and not with what they don't believe. In growing churches the greeters, worship leaders, coffee hosts, and RE teachers all reflect a positive, optimistic, and welcoming attitude. Growing congregations make room for newcomers; they are intimate, but not clannish. Growing churches have a mission statement that reflects their positive attitude toward growth and that mission statement is part of the consciousness of the whole congregation.

We cannot put new wine in old wineskins, and our UU mission and witness must reflect the changes that are taking place in the culture in which we live. This doesn't mean we are to ignore, discount, or criticize the preferences, needs, and desires of our long-time members, not at all. What this does mean is that we must expand our self-concept to also embrace the needs and desires of two more, very different generations. New occasions teach new duties; time makes ancient good uncouth. We must onward move and upward, who would keep abreast of truth.