

Presentation: “Going to the Dogs”

UUWC Service 9/27/26

What Values are we speaking to? Transformation, Love, Interdependence, Generosity



Good morning. I’m Dr. Nika Quirk, the Moderator of your Council, and I’m really delighted to be speaking with you on this autumn morning and in this year of celebrating UUWC’s 30th Anniversary..

The previous reading (provided below) is an excerpt of a sermon given at the UU congregation of Castine, Maine. I love that first statement - “true growth within a community is a beautiful contradiction, balancing the profound joy of deep connection with the inevitable trials of human friction.” I feel in my heart how UUWC is living into that reality. There’s a distinction made in using the words “true growth” that points us beyond sheer member numbers or service attendance and on to a path of discovery about who we’ve been, who we are now and who we are truly growing to become. A path of transformation.

When our congregation expanded in 2024, we were logistically focused on accommodating more people and scrambled a bit to adjust. We are a warm and welcoming community, with big hearts, but

truthfully, it was kind of sudden and prompted some of that “human friction”. We are still adapting.

As we welcomed an increasing number of visitors and new members over the past two years, we on Council realized we needed to shift to a broader set of questions related to growth and change. Because growth affects everything from ordering supplies to paid and volunteer staffing to building use to pledge income and budgeting. Growth is a set of opportunities. How could we have a shared concept of how congregations go through size transitions? Where could we find some shared wisdom on how to not only accommodate, but plan and support congregational growth to make it easier on all of us? Calling on our UU regional representative at the time, Rev. Tania Marquez, we found resources and embraced a model comparing attributes of different sized congregations.

(See chart provided below)

Council is introducing this viewpoint to you today to assist our community to focus on traveling together as a community in transition. We are an “in-between” congregation. Our hope is that it will help us with thinking and communicating about who we are as we grow, as well as with understanding and participating in visible changes . We continue to develop to support communication and practical functioning as a "resilient, vital community" continuing into the future. Models are not a prescribed way to grow; it's not “paint by the numbers.” Congregations in size transitions will be who they currently are while looking ahead and making choices that prepare the way into the next identity. In working with this model, we on Council see that UUWC has been overlapping and transitioning across these characterized identities for a long time.

Going to the Dogs is usually used as a negative statement about decline and deterioration. That is certainly not UUWC! But our current

size transition has moved us into the Collie as our congregational character. And it continues to be a big change.

How many of you have had cats as pets? How many have had dogs?

Our animal ministry moments often illustrate the different characters that we've experienced as typical for Cats or Dogs. The Cat is independent, likes comfort and the occasional cuddle but demands their own space and choices, decides on their own scheduling and timing, and is difficult to herd together (certainly not into consensus!). The Collie looks to its leaders, wants to be cared for, thrives when having a job to succeed with and be appreciated for, finds comfort and safety in having clear structure, like schedules and processes, that support communication and success in doing what needs to be done. Collies love their pack and are much better than Cats at sharing space and resources. Collies are loyal, loving and generous by nature.

Please remember - we are talking about Cat and Collie as staves of congregational development and size transition. This is not about Cat or Collie being Good or Bad.

We were a small Cat congregation that brought in a minister more than a decade ago which made us a little more Collie than strictly Cat. Then in 2023 and 24, Council started creating more structure, moving UUWC further into Collie and worked with our Minister and congregation to develop values and move our community identity more from Me to We. 2024 and 2025 were our biggest growth spurt, tripling our membership size. We are now developing shared ministry, preparing to focus on our Vision of the future and reassess our Mission and strategic financial plan. We are building systems to support interdependence. We are laying the foundations for the Garden in anticipation of continued outreach, expanding community relationships and membership growth. In fact, in our Transformative Stewardship training as well as our Stewardship Committee

communications, we encourage all of us to recognize that we are stewards of this land, this building, this congregation's programs and social justice activities, and yes, the current and future thriving of our community. We are still a little Cat, very much a Collie, and becoming a community of Gardeners tending seeds into blossoms.

What does this mean for us in our individual lives and spiritual practice?

Our Rev. Nancy Hitt will share thoughts and wisdom on that question.

Once upon a time- in the land of pre-pandemic living- the Council, myself, and a handful of interested members attended a UUA sponsored workshop in Los Alamos. In the afternoon, we were asked to sit with people from our home church to discuss the issues presented. The very first one had to do with how spirituality was expressed in our Sunday am services. Around us, other tables buzzed with excited conversation. We sat looking at each other in silence. Finally some one asked, "What does that even MEAN?" So we hailed our then Regional support person and asked her: What do UU's mean by expressing spirituality in community? We have only ever thought of that as a private, personal matter. What is everybody at those other tables talking about? The Rev. Sarah Millspaugh told us that most UU's understand spirituality- no matter what religious perspective it comes from- to be about how we connect with each other in matters of meaning and purpose. She opened a whole new way of understanding ourselves and each other and our congregation to us.

It was a growth moment. Instead of seeing ourselves as individual units sharing a space, we had a vision that reached deeper into ourselves and connected us in new ways to each other. It marked a change from a CAT perspective to a COLLIE perspective. Not that we surrendered our independence- not at all- but sharing our spirituality

and intentionally identifying common points of connection helped us grow. For ex: participating in joys/concerns at a Sunday service became less of a public newsletter and more of a community building effort. Subtly, but surely, our content changed and we learned about each other in different ways. Not because anyone stood up and said start talking in a new way, but because a newly understood reason for why we were sharing in the first place simply invited a new response. We were building spiritual connections. Growth happened.

Pursuing a Unitarian Universalist spirituality continues to help us grow. As we hear from Humanist, Pagan, Jewish, Indigenous, Christian, Buddhist, and other perspectives, we learn from each other. We reach out to each other. We realize that our similarities are often more remarkable than our differences. Respect becomes a palpable presence among us. Curiosity connects us in new ways.

As we pursue growth with intention and planning and purpose, we need to embrace the wake-up call that UU workshop sounded for us. Who are we and how do we connect in regard to matters of meaning and purpose? How do we affirm the cats among us, embrace the collies, and start the seedlings of the garden we dream of?

As we grow in numbers and dreams and conflicts and joys together, we need to continue to connect in matters of meaning and purpose- to connect as a spiritual community. We need to explore our shared values deeply.

For ex: Generosity is very much a spiritual component of growth. Generosity requires openness. It requires courage. It requires sensitivity to the needs of others- both individuals and our community. The generosity of our shared values is rooted- as all our values are- in love. Coast-Guard rescue swimmers- who put their own lives at severe risk to save others- use the motto: “so others may live” to describe what motivates them. Sometimes the risks of growth feel

like our lives are at risk. They are- but probably not in the way we think. Generosity calls us out of our hypervigilance on our own behalf- a fear- based practice if ever there was one. Intentionally practicing generosity- tending to the lives of others- is guaranteed to shape us into our best selves. It is also what connects us powerfully to each other- when we are the person in need, the generosity of others is what sustains us.

Which means that as a spiritual community, we need to commit to supporting each other on our spiritual journeys. We need to extend ourselves in patience and work to understand each other. Often, we understand ourselves better when we struggle to extend compassionate understanding to others. Along with all of the practical realities of congregational growth, our collective spiritual growth needs to be an intentional commitment. We will be offering multiple opportunities for that as UUWC continues to grow- with foresight, intention, and dedication. For now, come to church. Listen, discuss, debate, and learn from your community. Try new things. Try a new class- there are likely to be several new-to-us offerings in the future. Nurture your personal spiritual growth- and our community also grows. It's a win/win situation. Risky. Exciting. Definitely an adventure. The good news- remember that value of Interdependence? Look around this room. You are not on this journey alone! There are a few cats. There are a lot of collies. There are prescient gardeners of the future designing a new landscape! Together, we grow. Blessed Be.



Reading

From [Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Castine+2](#)

True growth within a community is a beautiful contradiction, balancing the profound joy of deep connection with the inevitable trials of human friction. The greatest joy lies in the shared experience of being truly seen and supported; it is the comfort of celebrated milestones, the relief of burdens divided, and the steady warmth of belonging to something larger than oneself. Yet, this closeness naturally brings trials, as diverse perspectives, misunderstandings, and conflicting egos create inevitable tension. True community demands that we confront our own selfishness, practice radical patience, and navigate difficult conversations instead of walking away. Ultimately, these challenges are not obstacles to community, but the very tools that refine us, transforming a casual group of individuals into a resilient, vital community. In UU practice, these joys and trials are inseparable. The Beloved Community is a **living covenant**—a place where we can celebrate the warmth and generosity of shared life while also committing to the hard work of repair, growth, and justice. It is a community that holds both the hope of an all inclusive spirit and the discipline of honest engagement, making it a space where love and truth are practiced daily

Congregation Size Comparison Chart

Compiled by the Rev. Christine Robinson. Please direct comments to revrobinson@gmail.com

	Nickname	Lyle Schaller's Ideas					Susan Beaumont's Ideas		
		The Cat	The Collie	The Garden	The House	The Garden Center	The Garden Center	The Campus	
1	Attendance	5-50	50-90	70-200	150-250	200-400	200-400	400-800	
2	Members	10-100	75-200	175-400	350-500	500-800	500-800	750-1500	
3	Other names	Family Fellowship	Pastoral Small/Mid	Program Mid-Sized I	Mid-Sized II, III	Large I (UU)	Large I (UU)	Large II Professional	
4									
	The Glass Ceilings								
5	Task of this level	Be a healthy family	Work with a minister	Yikes! Get the work done	Communicate! Policies!	Leadership development and program management	Leadership development and program management	Professionalization and Policy based governance/management	
6	Who Runs the place?	"All of us!"	The board and congregation	The board more and congregation less	The board even more and the congregation even less	The Board led by the minister. Congregation mostly pro forma.	The Board which includes the minister and highly skilled members. The congregation pro forma.	The Board which includes the minister and highly skilled members. The congregation pro forma.	
7	Who does the Ministry?	"All of us!"	The Minister	The Minister organizes volunteers	The minister supervises staff and organizes volunteers	The Sr. Minister organizes staff, the second minister organizes volunteers.	The Sr. Minister organizes staff, the second minister organizes volunteers.	Program staff do a good deal of ministry and organize volunteers.	
8	Relationship to minister	Aloof	"We need you! We love you! Take care of us!"	Keep us organized and help us grow our spirits	Keep us organized, offer great worship, take on more leadership and authority	Needs to inspire us to be our best selves (Sr) Help us find a place around here (Min2)	Needs to inspire us to be our best selves (Sr) Help us find a place around here (Min2)	Begins to need more than 2 (Sr) be a community figure and a fearless leader (others) keep things organized and know us and be known to us.	
9	Challenges for clergy	(if one) Job satisfaction	Balancing pastoral work with other aspects of ministry	Organizing things for others to accomplish	Learn to be a manager of staff, policies, leaders.	Learn to be a visionary leader, communicate caring while reducing direct pastoral care	Learn to be a visionary leader, communicate caring while reducing direct pastoral care	Learn (again!) to be a manager Let go of almost all pastoral care. Crystallize vision and keep staff motivated to it.	