Growth Trajectory Study June 2017

The Unitarian Church of Montpelier **6/20/17**

In UCM's 2020 Strategic Plan, Vision Outcome #5 is to create a long-range, comprehensive plan for accessible, sustainable physical space to assist us in fulfilling our mission. Action step #1 tasks the Board with examining the growth trajectory of the congregation over the past 10 years and projecting growth for the next 10 years. During the 2016-17 church year, the Board has attempted to fulfill this task.

Respectfully submitted by the Governing Board of our church:
Jo Ramano, Jennifer Payne, Melinda Moz, Nancy Read, William White, Priscilla Fox and Paul Hartmann; and with guidance from Reverend Joan Javier-Duval.

Introduction

We looked at four different aspects of our church life in order to evaluate the growth we have experienced in the past 10 years: Attendance at Sunday Services, UCM Membership, participation in our Religious Education programs and the results of an informal survey we conducted this past December. A complete outline of this report is as follows:

1. Attendance at Sunday services
2. UCM Membership
3. Participation in Religious Education programs
4. Survey results
5. Regional trends in UU congregations
6. Vermont Demographics
7. A general discussion of congregational size
8. Conclusions

1. Attendance at our Sunday services

The chart on the following page chronicles attendance at our Sunday services over the past 10 years. Using data recorded by the ushers each week in the "Ushers' Book" we analyzed a variety of metrics. A brief discussion of each line will help in understanding this information.

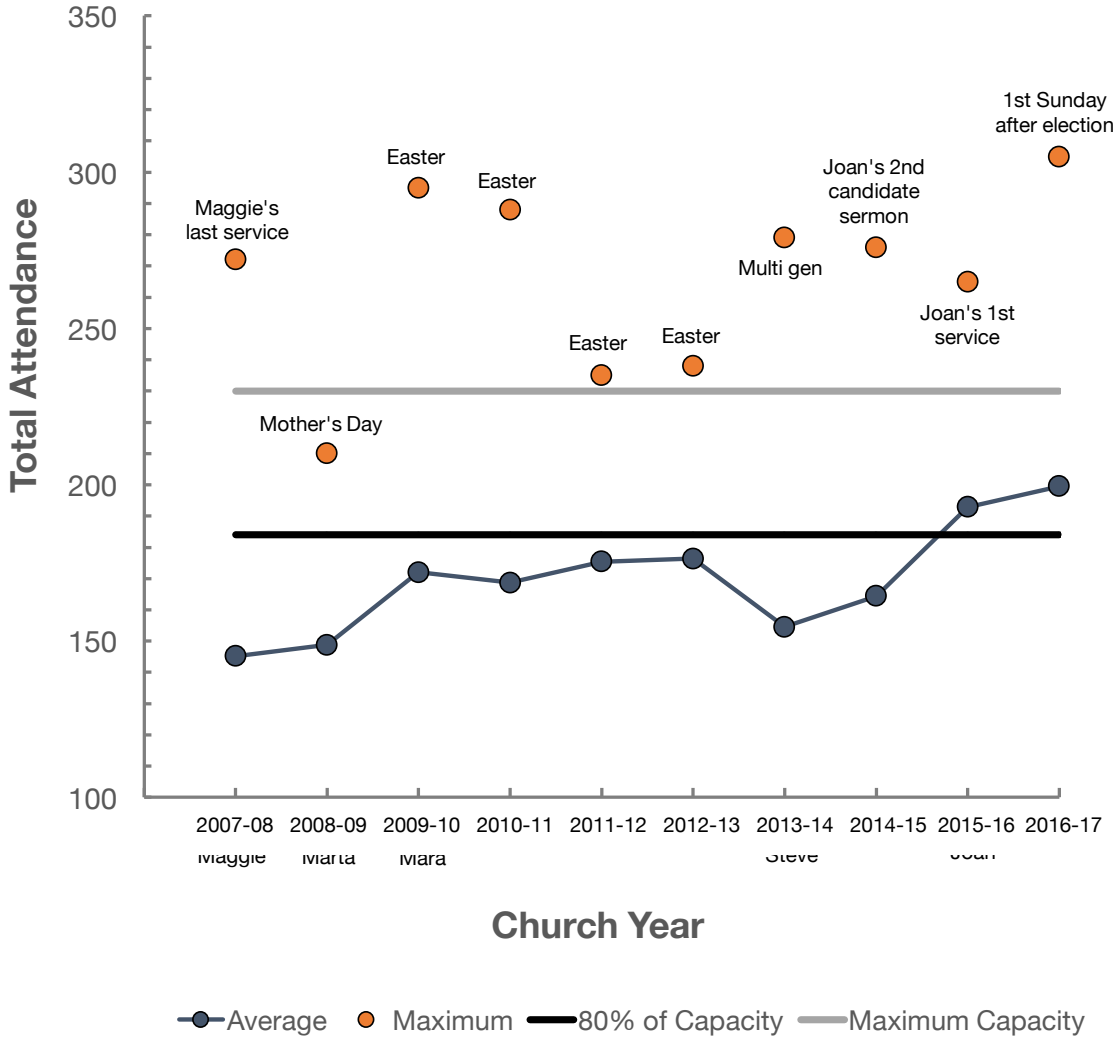
There are 2 straight lines on the graph; the line at 230 represents the maximum number of occupants the sanctuary can handle.

The line at 184 represents where the sanctuary is at 80% of capacity.

"Annual average attendance" is the average attendance for all Sundays during a church year.

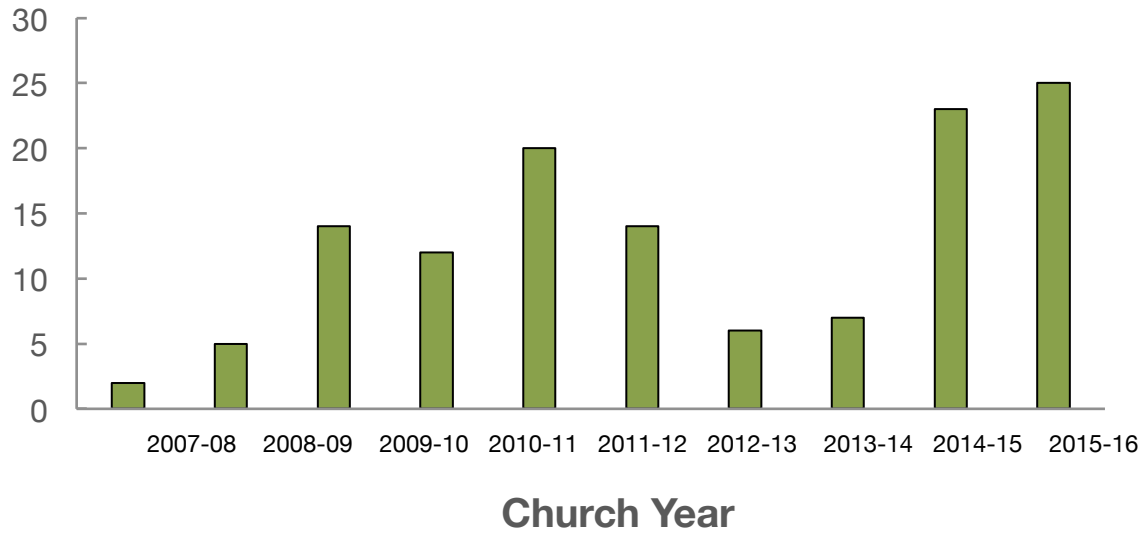
"Highest attendance" is the single service with the most number of people present. The theme of each service is noted to make it easier to understand these peak numbers. (It should be noted that this data does not include Christmas Eve services because they are not a regular Sunday service.)

UCM Attendance at Sunday Services 2008 – 2017



It is interesting to note that average attendance has grown by almost 38% from the 2007-08 church year to the present. For the **calendar** year 2016 alone, average total attendance was 198, higher than during any of the previous years for which we have information. Since Rev. Joan became our minister we have had the 2 periods of highest average attendance in recent history.

UCM Services per year Exceeding 184 people 2008 – 2017



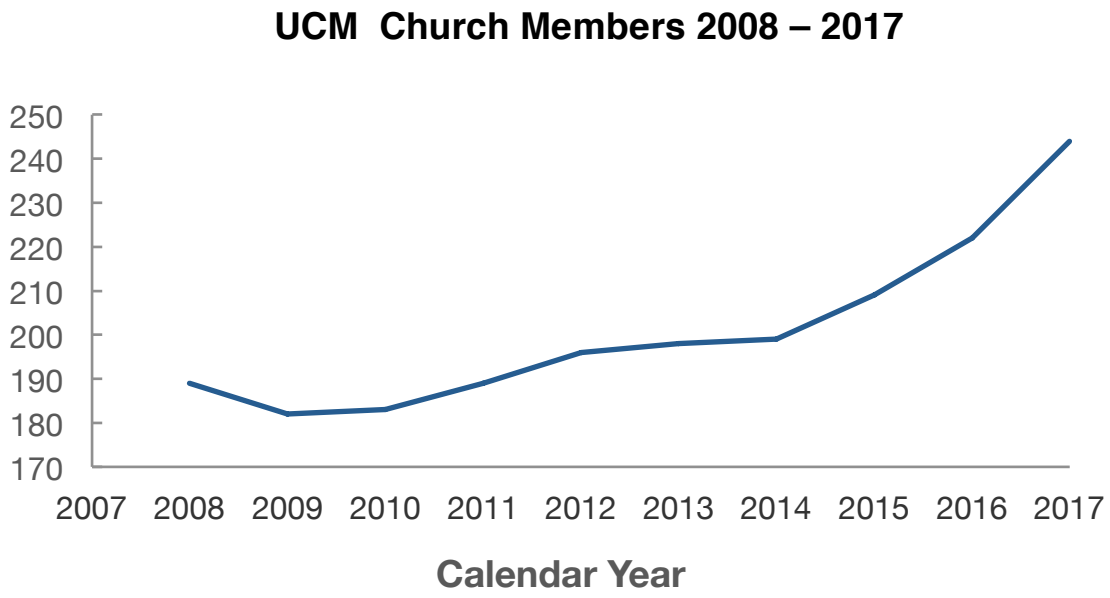
The 80% capacity line (184 people) is an important demarcation. It represents a point where the UUA and most other faith communities advise us that most people entering a service exceeding that number of people would view the sanctuary as full and often feel "there is no room for me". This bar chart shows how many Sundays each year we have had more than 184 people in attendance.

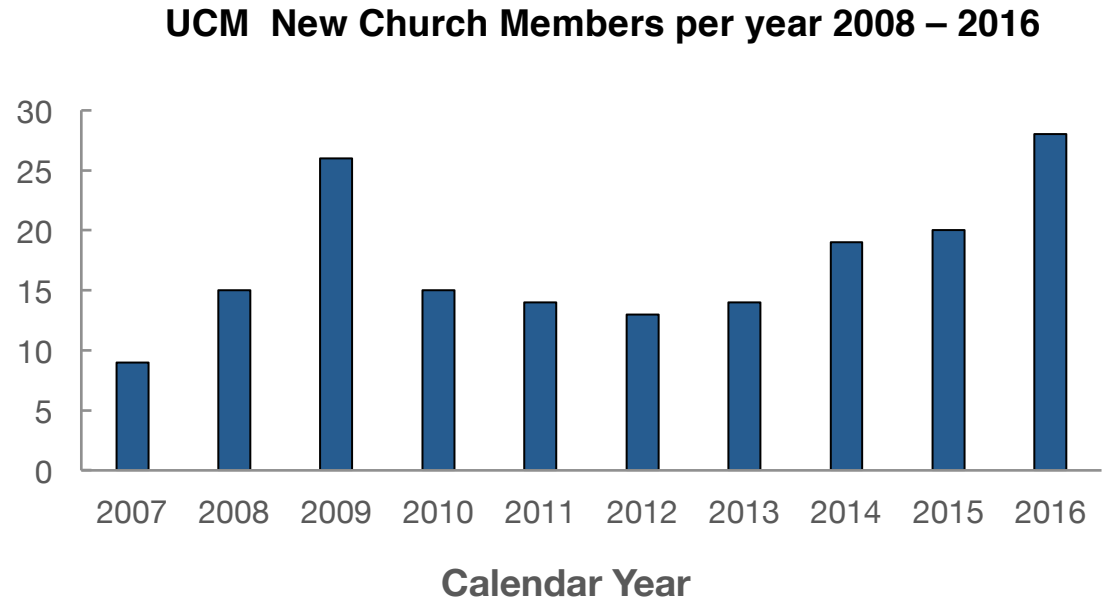
A few observations about what these first two Attendance graphs tell us:

1. Yes, we have experienced significant growth in the number of people attending our Sunday Services over the last ten years.
2. Our growth has been relatively steady during that period.
3 Using the 184 person line (80% capacity) as a guide, over half of our services during the 2016-17 church year have been overcrowded.
4. We also wonder what effect the 230 person "cap" has on the size of our congregation. We had 305 people attend service the first Sunday after the election; why did they not show up the next Sunday? Did they say something like "this church is too crowded for me"? We will never know the answer to this question but it is an interesting to consider the effect that our "cap" has on the size of our congregation.

2. UCM Membership

UCM membership has grown significantly over the past 10 years. In June of 2008, church data shows that there were 189 members, so there was a slight decline in membership between then and January of 2009. Rev. Maggie Rebmann retired in the spring of 2008, and Rev. Marta Flanagan became our interim minister that fall. It is logical to assume that this transition accounts for the slight membership decline during that period. Since 2009, membership growth has been steady, with an overall growth rate of 29%.





3. Religious Education

The number of children attending church has also grown over the past ten years, showing that UCM continues to attract young families. The Average Attendance Summary shows growth in children's attendance except for the two years when Rev. Steve Edington was our Interim Minister. Average Sunday attendance counted by the religious education (RE) program, which includes children in the nursery through 8th grade, has been 30 in both 2015 and 2016. The average RE attendance for the 2016-17 church year through May is 32 children. Given that some children and youth likely remain in the sanctuary for the whole service, the average may be slightly higher. It is also worth noting that RE registration numbers have also grown to some extent. In this church year (2016-17), 99 children are registered, compared to 85 in 2015-16 and 93 in 2013-2014.

4. Survey results

A survey was conducted of families attending our Sunday service this past December. It was conducted over 3 successive Sundays in an attempt to survey as many "regular" attendees as possible.

The largest number of households (35) have attended UCM for up to one year, and of these, 12 have become members within that year. The second largest number of households (31) have attended between 2 and 5 years. These are both clear indications of recent growth. Friends who have attended for 2-5 years represent a much smaller group than members who have attended for 2-5 years, which seems to show that after attending for a few years, people tend to become members.

Furthermore, while the largest number of people represented by the survey are between the ages of 51 and 70 (84 people) and the second largest number consists of people between the ages of 71 and 85 (52 people), children and youth account for fairly large numbers as well. The survey reported that 29 people are between the ages of 0 and 5, and 41 are in the 6 to 18 age group. Predictably, there is a dip in numbers in the 19 to 30 age group (17 people), but the numbers rebound in the 31 to 50 age group, which likely represents many young families (49 people).

5. Regional trends in UU congregations

In October 2015, the UUA published a report summarizing the Economic Sustainability of Ministries Summit that took place in June of 2015. The report mentions results from the most recent study by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. The study showed an increase of adults defining themselves as non-religious between 2007 and 2014, with 35% of the Millennial generation claiming no religious affiliation. However, Unitarian Universalists held steady at 0.3% of the adult population. The study also showed that UUs are getting younger and less wealthy.

To get a sense of the picture in New England, we spoke to Hilary Allen of the New England Region of the UUA in Boston. The following information is noteworthy:

- New England has 236 UU congregations. These are categorized by size, with "over 300" being the largest. UCM, with 244 members, is in the second-to-largest range (201-300) and is the second largest congregation in Vermont, after Burlington.
- Congregations often grow during times of political turmoil, such as the present time. On the Sunday after the 2016 election, UCM had its highest ever attendance, 305 people.
- Congregations that are experiencing growth often have the following characteristics; UCM has both:
    - A young, powerful minister. A minister with a young family is a plus. In UCM's case, the fact that Rev. Joan is very dedicated to social justice issues is likely a strong draw, given the current national political situation.
    - A strong RE program.
- Conversely, decline in church numbers is often related to unhealthy behavior; bullies and/or an old guard in control that is resistant to change. UCM is relatively free of these problems.
- Although not mentioned by Hilary, it is logical to think that a church that is on a sound financial footing is much more likely to attract newcomers and experience growth than one that is struggling financially. Here again, UCM is in a good position.
- On the negative side, people tend to view a church that is 80% or more full as "maxed out" and having no room for them. This points

to the need for UCM to act quickly to at least experiment with ways to relieve the overcrowding.

- The UUA has data showing growth/decline in membership in Vermont UU congregations between 2005 and 2015 (2016 data has not been compiled yet). Averaging all the Vermont congregations, there is a decline of 6 members. (For UCM the UUA reports a gain of 14 members, which seems low, although our figures do not go back to 2005). However, in most of the congregations that experienced the steepest declines, there was an issue accounting for the decline, such as conflict in the congregation or misconduct by the minister.

6. Vermont Demographics

We wondered if Vermont demographics may be of some usefulness. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau breaks down Vermonters by age. Our review of this info shows that in July 2010, there were "bulges" in the population between the ages of approximately 15 and 25, with a large bulge representing the college population between the ages of 18 and 22. There was another large bulge representing the baby boom generation, of ages approximately 45 to 62. The baby boom "echo" (children of baby boomers) can also be seen. Projecting to July 2020, baby boomers will be 10 years older, or 55 to 72. People in the baby boom echo will be between their late 20s and early 40s. A third chart shows births in Vermont between the years 1980 and 2015. From 2009 to 2015, births held quite steady at about 6000 per year, significantly less than during the 1980s and 1990s. Washington County actually lost 1.5% of its population between 2010 and 2015.

An article in the New Hampshire Union Leader that appeared in August, 2016 states that Vermont and New Hampshire are tied for the states having the oldest population in terms of median age. A study of Vermont population trends is beyond the scope of this report, and in any event it is unclear how much value such a study would add. Hilary Allen of the UUA noted that in the past, analytical data analysis has not proven to be a good predictor of future growth. But the fact that the state's population is aging should not be ignored.

The Planning Commission in Montpelier has some demographic information specific to Montpelier. There are two important observations from this information: the population of Montpelier has been holding steady or slightly declining and the average age in the city is going up. It is noteworthy that compared to the overall demographics and trends within the state and even in Montpelier, our congregation size is an anomaly in that it has quite a bit of age diversity and a growing number of young families.

7. A general discussion of congregational size

As we consider UCM's growth trajectory, we should also keep in mind the wide literature on congregational size and transitional growth. For many years, UCM was a solidly pastoral-sized congregation, meaning an average Sunday attendance of 76 to 140 people.[1] A small program-sized congregation has an average Sunday attendance of 225 to 400 people. Each congregation size category has defining characteristics and a stabilizing system and culture that supports its size.

The pastoral size congregation is organized around the support of a full-time pastor who leads worship and religious education. The pastor maintains direct relationships with all members and the governing board operates like a committee overseeing day-to-day operations. Members recognize each other's faces and know most people's names.

The program size church offers a variety of high-quality programs to meet a range of human and spiritual needs. A team of key program leaders - lay and ordained, paid and unpaid - work with the pastor on the ministries and programs of the church. Decision making is broadly distributed within a wider leadership circle and pastoral care is shared by lay people. A program size congregation functions as a community of smaller congregations under "one roof."

[1] This figure comes from Kevin Martin's The Myth of the 200 Barrier: How to Lead through Transitional Growth. In Raising the Roof: The Pastoral-to-Program Size Transition, Alice Mann defines a pastoral-size church as 51-150 people at worship and program-sized as 151-400.

For the last several years, UCM has inhabited a transitional size based on our average Sunday attendance.

There are four characteristics that transitional size churches share in common: 1) Transitional churches tend to be high-stress congregations for clergy as the pastor is expected to maintain a primarily relational role while also addressing programmatic expectations 2) Transitional churches tend to use up and burn out lay leaders as there is a shortage of leaders for the growing ministerial and programmatic needs of the church and leaders are overused and given multiple jobs 3) Transitional churches tend to need new programs, staff, and facilities all at the same time and 4) Transitional churches often experience tension and conflict as those who prefer the style of smaller churches resent the changes and those who want quality programs grow frustrated with this resistance.

It is clear that understanding how UCM is moving through church size categories is another important aspect of understanding the growth that is happening and, for the sake of the overall health of the congregation, making plans to support this growth.

8. Conclusions

There is no question that UCM is experiencing significant growth at this time, continuing a trend that began a decade ago. However, predicting growth for the next 10 years is difficult. Based on the factors discussed above, it seems reasonable to assume that UCM will continue to grow, but the rate of growth may decline. While the Vermont population is not growing, it can be argued that UCM's assets of a young, dynamic minister dedicated to social justice, a strong RE program, a strong financial base, and a myriad of ways for people to get involved in the church point toward continued growth. On the other hand, if UCM were to experience a significant change in staffing or other unexpected changes, UCM could well experience a decline in attendance and members. Overall, the Board feels that it is wise to plan for modest continued growth at this time.

Based on this Growth Study, the Board will appoint a task force to investigate the items noted in our Strategic Plan for 2017-18 regarding the physical space of our church. With that in mind, we feel this new task force should pay specific attention to these points:

1. We feel that the opposite of growth is decline and we do not believe that anyone wants to see a decline in our church. Therefore we should acknowledge that our church is in a growth mode. We see this growth as an "organic" process and a natural result of the factors identified above rather than a scripted plan to grow the church numerically.

2. Using the criteria noted earlier in this report, more than half of our Sunday services this past year have been overcrowded. The task force should investigate and propose ideas to alleviate this problem (e.g two services, overflow viewing, etc.) so that we can live within our mission of welcoming all and building a loving community.

3. Attendance at our Sunday services is a gateway to our church community and all of our various church related activities, of which there are many. Although we did not specifically look at the use of our church facilities for activities beyond our Sunday services, it is clear that all of the spaces in our building are put to good use and some of them are being stressed by our general growth, too. The task force should look at how to best utilize all of the facilities that we have.

*** We conclude this report with some final thoughts from our minister:

Though not discussed in this document, I also feel that UCM's growth over the past ten years has been due to a focus on the congregation's mission. A church member shared a recent anecdote with me that speaks to this. This person was in church one recent Sunday and someone who had attended services at UCM over ten years ago was back visiting. At the end of the service, he remarked to this church member that something felt different. It was hard for this person to put to words, but my sense is that he was especially struck by the level of activity and participation, sense of welcome, focus on social justice, and quality of worship. In essence, that Sunday morning experience illustrated the congregation living its mission!

While certain aspects of growth cannot be predicted, and may not even be a "goal," I believe that numerical growth that happens because of a dedication to our mission is a welcome outcome. If we assume that the congregation will maintain its focus on being a place of welcome for all, a place where people can come to nurture their spirits, where we focus on building loving relationships with one another, a place where we serve others and nurture our relationship with the planet, then, I believe we will continue to grow and ought to do what is necessary to have the institutional structures in place to support that growth.

Note – front page photograph by Annie Tiberio-Cameron