

Post-Denominational Age
Independent Study
Gretchen E. Weis
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Success Factors and Captured Lessons Learned from Unitarian Universalist Applications of the Satellite Church Growth Movement

Multi-site church is not a brand new concept. Non-denominational evangelical mega-churches began implementing multi-campus growth strategies in the 1980s. However, the growth of satellite church campus sites has exploded in the new millennium. Research estimates the use of multiple campus church sites grew from about 150 churches in 2001 to more than 3,000 today.¹

Multi-site churches now outnumber mega-churches, and the number of multi-site churches continues to grow.² Importantly, the average size of multi-site churches is declining as more mid- to small-sized churches get involved in the trend. According to researchers, small churches (30 to 200 people) tend to do multi-site as a niche outreach or as a regional-campus approach. Medium-sized churches (200 to 800 people) that expand through multi-site outreach tend to have two or three campuses. Larger churches (800 to 2,000 people) and mega-churches (2,000 people and more) are the most likely to be multi-site and they develop a large network of campuses.³ While previous multi-site church expansion was dominated by non-denominational churches, today, more than two-thirds of multi-site churches are now associated with a Protestant denomination.⁴

Multi-site church expansion in the past few years has included several Unitarian Universalist congregations using satellite campus strategies to meet a variety of intentional outreach and growth needs or economic challenges in their

¹ Surratt, Geoff, Greg Ligon and Warren Bird, *Multisite Church Road Trip: Exploring the New Normal*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), p. 217.

² Bird, Warren and Kristin Walters, *Multisite is Multiplying*. (Dallas: Leadership Network, 2010) p. 2.

³ Surratt, Geoff, Greg Ligon and Warren Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One Church in Many Locations*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), p. 18.

⁴ Bird, Warren and Kristin Walters, *Multisite is Multiplying*. Whitepaper. (Dallas: Leadership Network, 2010) p. 2.

respective communities. The purpose of this report is to explore the multi-site church trend and take a look at the particular multi-campus strategies as adapted and practiced by the First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Diego, California, the First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque, New Mexico, and the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Houston, Texas, in order to glean key success factors and to capture other lessons learned as a guide to help other Unitarian Universalist congregations decide if a multi-campus satellite strategy is right for their circumstances.

The Success of Multi-Site Church

According to Leadership Network, a private, non-profit church consultancy specializing in multi-site growth, multi-site churches can now be found in 47 U.S. states (including Washington, D.C.) and six Canadian provinces.⁵ One out of three Protestant churches today is considering developing a new service in a new location.⁶ What drivers motivate a church to create multi-campus ministry?

Evangelism, sometimes referred to as the Great Commission based on the charge in Matthew 28: 18-20 to “make disciples of all nations,” is the overwhelming reason Christian churches give to open up additional campus sites.⁷ A far distant second reason is to address overcrowding problems.⁸ However Rev. Dave Ferguson, lead pastor of Community Christian Church, an early adopter of the multi-site church concept in Illinois, is quoted in a recent Leadership Network whitepaper, downplaying the use of satellite outreach to solve a lack of building or parking space or expansion opportunities on urban land-locked campuses. “Multi-site is a proactive strategy for reaching more people, not just a reactive response to more crowding,” Ferguson explained.⁹

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 7.

⁶ Surratt, Geoff, Greg Ligon and Warren Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One Church in Many Locations*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), p. 9.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 10.

⁸ Shields, Stephen, *2007 Survey of 1,000 Multi-Site Churches*, (Dallas: Leadership Network, 2007), Appendix A, answers given to question 30: What is your primary motivation for doing multi-site?

⁹ Bird, Warren, *Extending Your Church To More Than One Place: A Field Report on the Emerging Multi-Site Movement*. Whitepaper. (Dallas: Leadership Network, 2003), p. 5.

In lieu of the time and capital needed to build new facilities or expand existing buildings, many churches see a “one church, multiple-location” outreach as more cost-effective to reach more people through increased available seating capacity for simultaneous video-based worship and more geographically diverse meeting space for small group ministry activities, lifespan religious education and greater on-the-ground community involvement. Churches see an opportunity to reduce overhead costs through shared staffing and volunteer leadership, financial management and marketing outreach, as well as savings in worship, education and other program development costs by leveraging programming resources across multiple venues.

In addition, some churches have found that more widespread geographic presence has allowed for socio-economic and multi-cultural border crossing, resulting in greater membership diversity. While the majority of larger, mega-churches reflect a predominantly Caucasian profile, this trend is beginning to change. Fifteen percent of multi-site churches that responded to surveys described themselves as multi-ethnic, with no single group comprising 80 percent or more of the church’s population. Nearly one-quarter of multi-site churches surveyed are offering worship services in languages other than the one spoken at the initial campus.¹⁰

Key Factors for Multi-Site Success

Approximately 90 percent of the multi-site church satellites formed since 2000 remain operational and successful, or have been spun off as independent, stand-alone churches according to a 2010 survey by Leadership Network.¹¹

One key success factor is a church’s ability to replicate the same “DNA” at each location, sharing the same vision, mission, purpose or philosophy across all locations. Churches must be intentional in fighting the development of an “us-them” multiple-location mentality, avoiding phrases like “main campus,” which implies

¹⁰ Bird, Warren and Kristen Walters, *Multisite is Multiplying*. Whitepaper {Dallas: Leadership Network, 2010}, pp. 15-16.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 24.

that other locations are of secondary importance. Many multi-site churches address this problem by referring to the different sites, including the original church, by a single name, and adding a geographic direction such as “North” or “East” to designate a particular campus.

Many churches often perform a zip-code analysis of existing membership to encourage members to attend a campus location nearest them, thus helping to spread church culture, mission, vision and values throughout the system. Other churches are intentional about seeding a new site with existing lay leaders who have been specially trained in welcoming to provide a visible, stable leadership presence at the start-up location. Still other churches make sure to host unity events throughout the year, such as an all-church worship, retreat, picnic, or shared holiday celebrations to build a sense of one church in multiple locations.

While the satellite concept is to realize a single church experience in multiple locations, the truth is that implementation of multi-site campuses often creates more of a smorgasbord of worship, religious education, small group ministry, music and other experiences from site to site, rather than a “McDonald’s franchise experience” where the menus and food offerings are alike.¹² This smorgasbord offering can often motivate church members to participate in events at a variety of locations, which helps to build and reinforce the experience of a single united church offered in multiple locations.

Multi-site church growth capitalizes on what Jim Collins, author of the business development book *Built to Last*, calls “the genius of the ‘and,’” -- the paradoxical view that allows an organization to pursue both A and B effectively, simultaneously. In the case of multi-site church expansion, Rev. Dave Ferguson defines advantages around Collins’ work. He writes, multi-site church offers a chance for churches to grow larger *and* smaller simultaneously. It offers brand new experiences within the context of a trusted brand, a known church entity. Multi-site allows for staff generalists *and* specialists. It provides a way to realize greater reach, *and* at cost savings. It allows a congregation to stay “here” *and* move “there,”

¹² Bird, Warren and Kristin Walters, *Multisite is Multiplying*. Whitepaper. (Dallas: Leadership Network, 2010) p. 6.

simultaneously. Multi-site growth can address more need *and* offer more support in meeting those needs. And, it can offer exciting new outreach *and* more experienced management maturity in directing that outreach.¹³

Strong, effective leadership is essential at all locations for a multi-site church to succeed. A satellite needs not only the right “face with the place,” but a leader with strong entrepreneurial skills on-site, to help provide ongoing energy, focus and enthusiasm, especially during the awkward initial development and early growth phases. Strong relational skills are also seen as a must in order to work effectively in the complex matrix environment of multi-site church.¹⁴ Similarly to the corporate business world, a leader from a main campus or headquarters location may not be the best satellite leadership choice, as he or she may be more highly skilled in large organizational management, dependent on greater staffing resources, and lacking the flexible, “think fast on your feet” entrepreneurial problem-solving skills needed for a small start-up to succeed. Ideally, a campus pastor or full-time site director should also have networking connections within the community immediately surrounding the campus location.

He or she should also be bilingual, as needed. And, if a new location is designed to attract more of a specific ethnic or multi-cultural membership, the ideal “face with the place,” as well as ushers and greeters, should be representative of the targeted ethnic or cultural background, whenever possible.

The decision to become multi-site often results in a significant increase in lay leadership involvement. Nearly four out of five multi-site churches saw a significant increase in the number of lay people interested in volunteering to support the multi-site expansion effort.¹⁵ Effective leadership development is especially key to ongoing multi-site success, at both the central campus as well as interested members at satellite sites.

¹³ Ferguson, Dave, “The Multi-Site Church: Some of the Strengths of This New Life Form,” *Leadership Journal*, Spring 2003. (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 2003), p. 81.

¹⁴ Bird, Warren. *Avoiding Detours: Insights from Multi-Site Pioneers Who Are Leading the Way*. (Dallas: Leadership Network, 2004), p. 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 13.

Leading multi-site church consultants believe that small group ministry is the ideal laboratory setting in which to recognize and groom future lay leadership. “Group life serves as each site’s relational glue, the muscle for doing ministry, and a primary context for leadership development.”¹⁶

A campus pastor or site director can experience a prospective leader’s enthusiasm, attitude, common sense problem-solving and communication skills within the small group setting, and can pay attention to how others in the group respond to their leadership skills and abilities.

Small group settings also allow for highly personalized mentoring and coaching, allowing someone to take on more leadership responsibilities over time within the small group activity. Success in the small group setting allows for leadership opportunities in larger church activities going forward. Ideally, current church leaders should be looking for and grooming their own replacements, as they continue to progress to greater leadership responsibilities within the multi-site system.¹⁷

Financial Considerations

Surveys show that the primary funding source for new sites comes from existing campuses, either through general budget support, special offerings taken or capital campaigns.¹⁸ The recommended budget for a new site launch can vary greatly depending on a variety of factors, from staffing, to real estate or rental costs and technology needs. Consultants advise that low risk satellite growth models, which rely on simple, low-cost programming and a minimal investment to train staff or volunteers in how to record video and use Web-based content, can be as inexpensive as starting a new small group ministry. Churches who use a regional growth model can spend several hundred thousand to more than a million dollars trying to duplicate the experience of their primary location. Except for very large

¹⁶ Surratt, Geoff, Greg Ligon and Warren Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One Church in Many Locations*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), p. 176.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 142-152.

¹⁸ Bird, Warren and Kristin Walters. *Multisite is Multiplying*. (Dallas: Leadership Network, 2010), p. 7

mega-churches, most churches opening their first off-site campus will invest between \$50,000 and \$150,000.¹⁹ Ongoing costs to support a satellite also vary depending on the size of the operation, on-site staffing needs and the number and type of programs and services offered there. There are real savings to be captured from centralized shared resources, especially for administrative and financial management needs.

Often, the largest single upfront expense associated with a new campus is technology, including video recording, computer and projection or broadcast equipment and the staffing resources to troubleshoot and operate audio-visual equipment at each site, so that sermons from another location can be simulcast, streamed live, or played from a previous DVD recording. The average technology start-up costs can be around \$71,000, according to 2010 survey results.²⁰

The second largest upfront costs associated with a campus launch involve finding, buying, renting and converting a new facility, typically averaging approximately \$64,500. The third highest launch expense involved marketing and advertising, which averaged approximately \$4,700 per location.²¹

Tougher Issues Associated with Multi-Site Growth

The bigger a church becomes, with more campus locations, the more complex it becomes to manage effectively. A traditional single-church organizational chart typically reflects a hierarchal management style with the minister and board of trustees at the top and the remaining staff in clearly marked reporting relationships. Portfolios of responsibilities, accountability and decision-making processes tend to be clear.

Leadership Network consultants liken the addition of multi-site church campuses to having children: “Having one child doesn’t require a major change in lifestyle for most couples. ...Adding a second child seems to quadruple the

¹⁹ Surratt, Geoff, Greg Ligon and Warren Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One Church in Many Locations*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), p. 98.

²⁰ Bird, Warren and Kristin Walters. *Multisite is Multiplying*. Whitepaper. (Dallas: Leadership Network, 2010), p. 8.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 8.

challenges, and adding a third child raises the level of family complexity exponentially. Families with four or more children, however, seem to find a system that accommodates the additional offspring with minimal upset to the core. That's the goal of a multi-site church as it moves from being an organization to being an organism: to accommodate growth without having to reinvent the structure."²²

As a church structure evolves to become more like an organism than a traditional organization, each site tends to have a hierarchical reporting structure answering to the campus pastor or site director, who then reports to a system-wide lead pastor. Yet staff also have dotted line reporting structures along functional responsibilities with their staff counterparts at each location. Campus pastors meet and communicate with one another regularly, as do religious education directors, music directors, youth directors and more.

Ongoing quality communication is essential to manage staff and activities from multiple locations. Some multi-site churches have created password protected intranet sites for staff to access and share documents, calendars and to chat live with one another online. Other churches experiment with the use of video, phone or Internet conferencing, such as Skype, to host team meetings with participants from different sites. Churches also use site-specific and all-church newsletters and blogs to keep staff and membership in the loop.

Despite advances in digital communication tools, face-to-face management is also important. Lead ministers are encouraged to do "management by walking around," visiting the different satellites as often as possible. Consultants recommend that multi-site church hiring should focus on a candidate's relational strengths as much, if not more, than his or her functional strengths and experience. According to Rev. Peter Roebbelen, of Chartwell Baptist Church, which has four campuses in and around suburban Toronto, Canada, "At first we hired for expertise,

²² Surratt, Geoff, Greg Ligon and Warren Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One Church in Many Locations*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), p. 138.

which seems great on paper, but people without relational sensitivities don't work well in the complex matrix environment of a multi-site church."²³

A multi-site church in the 21st Century has to be able to manage and use technology well. The success of the multiple video venue worship experience depends on consistently reliable, high quality filming and projecting capabilities. Ideally, campus sites should not be launched until technology has been in place long enough to give the ministers, audio visual staff and lay volunteers time to practice and become proficient with technology tools at each site.

Providing religious education at satellite sites is an often complex "chicken or the egg" challenge. Quality religious education experiences help to attract and retain families to the new campus, but they often require a critical mass of children to hold a meaningful program that will bring families back for more. Unfortunately, it is often difficult to achieve a critical mass of children on-site Sunday after Sunday during the start-up and early growth phases of a campus. Multi-site churches must be flexible enough and prepared to meet the religious education needs of children, as if enough children will walk through the door on a given Sunday. Many satellites also plan for multigenerational worship, allowing for participative moments in the service with the children present.

Even failure in multi-site church development can be a form of success, as a significant amount of "learning by doing" happens in multi-site church growth. Staffing, programming, music and worship styles that work for one church in a particular urban, suburban or rural location may not work for another church in similar setting. Change in leadership may set some projects back, while other congregations continue forward easily, learning through the changes. According to survey results, the two biggest reasons that 10 percent of multi-site campuses fail and have to close are location problems or issues associated with the campus pastor.²⁴

²³ Bird, Warren, *Avoiding Detours: Insights from Multi-Site Pioneers Who Are Leading the Way*. Whitepaper. (Dallas: Leadership Network, 2004), p. 2.

²⁴ Bird, Warren and Kristin Walters. *Multisite is Multiplying*. Whitepaper. (Dallas: Leadership Network, 2010), p. 24.

Church growth experts emphasize that multi-site growth is a means toward an end, not an end goal in itself.²⁵ With that in mind, let's take a closer look at three Unitarian Universalist congregations that have experimented with satellite growth in different ways in the Southwest and western parts of the U.S.

San Diego Case Study: Multi-Site Outreach for Greater Diversity

Members of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Diego (First UU) had been discussing the opportunity to seed and found another congregation in the San Diego area for nearly two decades. A demographic study had been commissioned, identifying Chula Vista in the South Bay as the fastest growing area in San Diego County currently not served by a Unitarian Universalist church. South Bay is also the most ethnic and culturally diverse area of the county, home to Latinos, Filipinos, Asian and African Americans, including many multi-racial families. The predominantly white congregation of approximately 800 members at First UU became excited about the opportunity to reach out to a more diverse part of the county.

Rev. Arvid Straube was called to the San Diego church in 2004, bringing with him experience in building two new congregations in Durham, North Carolina. In 2006, a task force was formed from First UU members who lived in the South Bay area and were interested and willing to work on forming a satellite campus there.

Rev. Straube encouraged the task force to visit North Coast Church, an evangelical pioneer in the use of video to fuel multi-site growth, in nearby Vista, California. The team also visited a multi-site church in Los Angeles in order to experience first-hand "one church in multiple locations," which included the use of video and multiple worship styles. "Immersion visits are key for anyone thinking about starting up a satellite location," Straube explained, "because you have to see successful multi-site church in action in order to truly get the concept."

The team also studied the books *Multi-Site Church Revolution* and *Multi-Site Road Trip* by Leadership Network consultants Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon and Warren

²⁵ Bird, Warren. *Extending Your Church to More than One Place*. Whitepaper. (Dallas: Leadership Network, 2003), p. 6.

Bird. These books offered advice, and offered “how to” templates and “to do” checklists for launching a satellite church. The team began to think through adapting Christ-centered evangelism to a Unitarian Universalist (UU) perspective. The “evangelical outreach mission” the task force and larger church could support was to bring Unitarian Universalism to a part of the community currently not being served by a congregation. It represented an opportunity for First UU to become a more ethnically, culturally and socio-economically diverse church by starting up a South Bay campus.

The team began to explore prospective on-the-ground interest in South Bay. Ads were placed in community newspapers. Initial exploratory visioning and planning community meetings attracted a number of multi-racial families. The task force began planning an estimated budget and timeline needed to launch the South Bay campus site.

First UU needed to raise about \$150,000 for the first two years. The South Bay budget was roughly \$70,000 to \$75,000 per year, including about \$1,600 per month for rent, \$24,000 annually for a part-time on-site staff person and \$1,400 per month for musicians. First UU received a growth grant from the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), and raised the rest of the \$150,000 through district chalice lighter grants, a grant from a wealthy church member’s foundation, as well as hosting several fundraising events and taking up special collections.

Plans were reached to launch the South Bay campus during the first Sunday in October 2008, in a rented schoolhouse. The worship style would be contemporary, using a rock and roll band that sometimes played at First UU.

On the UUA’s advice, First UU ran a \$15,000 direct mail campaign to attract people to the first service. Community newspaper advertising was also used. A simple Website for South Bay was created a few months prior to launch. Word of mouth was spreading, but First UU also employed some “guerilla marketing” tactics to great effect. The young adult group at church created flyers and posted them on every possible bulletin board or shop window in South Bay where they received permission to do so. The church also received permission from the City of Chula Vista to use chalk on area sidewalks. First UU church members wrote various

messages about the new church start-up, adding the new Website and phone number in their sidewalk art. First UU church members also exhibited at a booth at several community events prior to launch, to talk up the new church.

As a result, more than 100 people came to the first church service. First UU was thrilled. “Having more than 100 people at the first service was huge,” Straube said. “The rock and roll band used contemporary music and music from the teal *Singing the Journey* hymnals. We had enough music support to carry the songs off successfully.” In addition to the full time band, Straube credits having religious education activities from the very start to help build critical mass. He also credits the many First UU members who live in the South Bay area who were committed enough to the project to make South Bay their new home congregation.

Many visitors credited the guerilla marketing activities as the primary driver for their attendance. Some of those initial attendees stayed and told others. Today, South Bay has approximately 100 people on its mailing list and typical worship attendance is between 40 to 50 people at 10:00 a.m. Sunday. South Bay uses a DVD of the previous week’s sermon from the First UU Hillcrest location. This one-week video delay allows for more live preaching as well, as Rev. Straube and Associate Minister Rev. Kathleen Owens preach at South Bay on a regular basis throughout the year. The campus hosts a discussion about the sermon topic each week following the service, which allows for quality face time with the ministers.

Staffing at South Bay was challenging. Initially, First UU hired a part-time seminary student who needed an internship in the San Diego area. As campus minister, she was charged with getting South Bay up and running. Unfortunately, she quit suddenly due to a family emergency just as South Bay was about to open its doors. South Bay next hired a young woman with leadership skills and social media experience; but when a full time job opened up elsewhere, she had to leave the part-time church position, although she remains a member of the South Bay congregation.

First UU then advertised for the position and hired a UU who could speak Spanish. According to Straube, this changed everything. Marta Cardenas grew up in Mexico and holds a master’s degree in intercultural education. She is an activist

with deep connections within the South Bay community, especially around immigration rights issues.

Mar, as she is known, provided the energy, passion and community connections needed to take the South Bay campus to the next level, building key Latino community relationships and garnering media attention for the church in the Spanish-language press. Unfortunately, her independent management style often put her at loggerheads with the long-term church staff at the Hillcrest location. Mar ultimately resigned as director, but remains involved with the congregation. Kristen Kuriga now leads the South Bay campus on a full-time basis. She is bilingual and is responsible for social justice activities at both campuses.

Growth at South Bay has been slower than expected. First UU believed the new campus was going to tap into huge pent-up demand and double in size every year or two. The satellite grew in the first few weeks at the initial school location, but then growth stalled.

The school location was impeding growth. People were having a difficult time finding the church. Several years ago, the church found an available commercial storefront rental property located on Broadway, the main thoroughfare of Chula Vista. Guerilla marketing helped spread the word about the new location, and Sunday worship attendance continued to increase until the new location reached physical limitations defined by the way South Bay was setting up chairs and using the space.

Little details can make a big difference in small church environments. Previously, chairs had been set up in an intimate semi-circle configuration. Sometimes people would walk in and find it difficult to find a place to sit. South Bay has now rearranged its seating to traditional rank and file row formation, to invite greater attendance. Attention was paid to steer regular worshippers towards the front to leave more room towards the door for visitors and latecomers to find a place to sit. Growth continues to be slower than expected, but the South Bay campus has found a good location with additional space expansion opportunities to accommodate future growth.

While the initial start-up marketing was designed to reach multi-racial families – the demographic that first attended community-planning meetings back in 2008 – the South Bay campus actually attracts Latino and Anglo families. Thanks to Mar’s tenure as director, the church site continues to attract visitors and new members from the bi-lingual, former Catholic Mexican community.

According to Rev. Straube, many of the former Catholics coming to South Bay seem very happy to find a theological home in Unitarian Universalism. “Mexican Unitarians represent a unique spiritual expression,” he explained. “Many of our newfound congregants were experiencing the same journey of theological discovery that most UU’s make. It doesn’t really matter what form of initial religious experience is being rejected. If American Unitarianism reflects a revolt against Puritanism, Mexican UU’s are struggling against Catholicism. However, there is not only religious Catholicism, but also cultural Catholicism. Transitioning to becoming a UU, there’s a struggle to identify what you want to keep from the experience of being raised Catholic, and what you wish to leave behind.”

The original vision for South Bay was to expand membership until weekly worship attendance reached approximately 200 people, and then spin the satellite off as a stand-alone church with its own minister. Given the slow growth rate, First UU believes South Bay may be maturing enough to begin planning for an eventual spin-off, even at lower weekly attendance rates. Straube believes that sometime in the next few years, when weekly worship attendance reaches more than 100, South Bay might be ready to become an independent, stand-alone church.

First UU considers the South Bay satellite a tremendous success. “We knew we had achieved success the moment we began to meet the spiritual needs of people who were not attending a UU church prior to 2008. We have created a campus site that is more successful than a huge number of stand-alone UU congregations operating today,” Straube said. “We said we’d start a congregation, and we did. We said we’d have a presence in South Bay, and we do. We said we would be witness to our values in South Bay, and we are through our social justice work there. We said we wanted to be diverse, and we are. We said we wanted to be a template for the denomination in reaching out in bicultural diversity, and we are.”

Straube noted that South Bay has bilingual services and an increasingly bicultural congregation. The South Bay church has become successfully embedded in the community within only four years and has been building relationships with area politicians and countless other community leaders. Straube wishes that more UU congregations were reaching out to start up satellites to seed new church growth. He laments that congregational formation does not seem to be a priority at the UUA under current leadership.

That being said, church seeding, in Straube's experience, seems to work best as an individual church's specific project rather than as a UUA-sponsored project or regional UU cluster activity. There was a movement within the San Diego area cluster of UU churches to try to make South Bay a cluster project instead of a First UU project. However, Straube was concerned at the lack of a clear line of accountability in that proposed approach, and First UU chose to proceed alone in creating South Bay.

San Diego: Celebrating What Surprised and Delighted

When South Bay started in Fall 2008, Hillcrest was a predominantly white congregation. That changed. Members of the South Bay congregation began participating more regularly in Hillcrest activities, bringing greater ethnic, cultural and socio-economic diversity to the Hillcrest campus. For example, some Latino or multi-ethnic families began attending South Bay but preferred some of the programming at Hillcrest and ultimately switched to that campus.

First UU has held several joint services and unity activities, but it has been members from both campuses switching back and forth to attend different programming, from small group ministries to adult religious education classes on a regular basis, that has helped build shared church community between both sites. Straube estimates that nearly all regular worship attendees and lay leaders from Hillcrest have experienced the South Bay campus more than once and the majority of the South Bay members have been to the Hillcrest campus.

San Diego: Lessons Learned from South Bay

Much of the multi-site literature recommends using a single church name in addition to a geographic distinguisher, to help underscore the branding of the single church, multiple location experience. Straube agrees that there was a downside to creating two separate, distinct names – Hillcrest and South Bay – because the names have reinforced separateness between both sites, instead of unity. The separate, unrelated names unintentionally promoted a “mother ship/step-child” relationship, particularly with staff at both locations. In hindsight, Straube would have preferred using the names First UU Hillcrest and First UU South Bay.

Staffing issues created huge challenges for the South Bay start-up. Straube believes the initial staff turnover of the key on-site leader hampered South Bay’s ability to get off the ground and to attract greater growth more quickly through stable leadership presence. “In hindsight, we did not start off with the right face with the place,” Straube explained. “We learned the hard way what a difference it can make to have on-site leadership that comes from and speaks the same language as those in the surrounding community you are reaching out to attract. And you need someone who will be able to journey the entire distance from start-up to stand-alone congregation with you, if at all possible.”

Tensions between the staff at Hillcrest and South Bay also created significant problems. Straube noted, “When I talked to the Hillcrest staff about South Bay initially, I got a lot of nods and smiles, but what we really needed were actual work results. Unfortunately, the staff was not willing to change their work habits to support South Bay. I thought we had staff buy-in, but we didn’t. For example, membership was unhappy about having to process new members from South Bay. The lead administrator at Hillcrest was constantly fighting with the director at South Bay. I finally had to fire the Hillcrest administrator.”

He added, “In a large church, policies and procedures are important to the way we get things done, and in a new venture you have to have entrepreneurship and flexibility. The tension between these two creates a constant, complex management challenge. You have to have staff willing to work with one another despite these tensions.”

Straube believes that the initial \$15,000 investment to do a direct mail marketing campaign was a waste of time and resources. Rather, First UU found the guerilla marketing tactics – from word of mouth to posters, community newspaper advertising, writing on the sidewalk with chalk and exhibiting in a booth at community events – to be far more effective in attracting newcomers to the South Bay church.

Today, the most effective marketing comes from South Bay’s social justice activities in service to the community. The church is well known within the immigration rights community and continues to draw visitors from that demographic. Church members have also created greater visibility and have attracted visitors through their work for South Bay Pride, Day of the Child activities and other community events. In addition, Chula Vista sponsors a wild, wacky ugly float parade during the holidays, and the South Bay church always sponsors a float.

Looking forward, Straube notes there are additional activities that South Bay can host to align itself more directly with community needs, including holding citizenship or English as a second language classes on site. All South Bay area schools have switched to year-round school, creating child-care challenges for working parents throughout the community during the various school breaks. Many of the area evangelical churches host Bible school throughout those breaks. As South Bay explores new directions for its Sunday religious education needs, the church is keeping this community child care need in mind for future outreach and service.

More than half of church satellites hold services at schools.²⁶ However, as noted earlier, South Bay’s initial school location hampered growth. The church’s presence was virtually invisible to the community and the school setting did not allow for additional meeting space for small group ministry and adult religious education activities Monday through Friday evenings. Straube emphasizes that “location, location, location” is key to success. South Bay has found a permanent,

²⁶ Bird, Warren, *Survey of 1,000 Multi-Site Churches*. Whitepaper (Dallas: Leadership Network, 2004) p. 7.

highly visible storefront home with plenty of space to grow on the main street in Chula Vista.

While South Bay provided religious education for children and youth at start-up as a way to attract families, the church has failed to achieve a critical mass of children for an ongoing, sustainable program. Many families have visited South Bay in the past four years and then failed to return. Straube suspects that the children of these families did not enjoy the religious education experience, thus influencing a family's decision not to return to South Bay. Straube's concern is when religious education curriculum is highly pedagogical, children experience it as less fun and more like school. And, such curriculum can be too complicated for amateur volunteers teachers to lead effectively. Straube also wonders how well curriculum developed for predominantly white children at Hillcrest may translate for the multi-cultural children of South Bay. The South Bay campus is currently conducting an appreciative inquiry into religious education in order to determine what might need to change, including exploring small church, multi-site, or multi-cultural models from which to learn.

As UU congregations become more intentional about reaching out to and attracting greater ethnic and multi-cultural diversity, they must be intentional about finding greeters, ushers and leaders from target demographics in order to attract and retain more people from that demographic. Straube noted that the traditional UU volunteer demographic of elder white females, who sat on the initial South Bay visioning and planning committee, did heartfelt work in helping to get South Bay up and running, but did not help to attract the desired South Bay community demographic. "While these wonderful volunteers had great energy, they did not have existing community relationships to reach out and attract people from different socio-economic and multi-cultural backgrounds. You need to involve people from your target demographic from the very start, whenever and wherever possible," Straube observed.

Bilingual capabilities were also a key factor in spurring greater bicultural community involvement and growth at South Bay. "Once we decided that bilingual leadership was essential, everything changed. We began to attract a new

demographic to South Bay,” Straube noted. South Bay offers a Spanish language covenant small group ministry. In addition, readings and other portions of weekly worship are in Spanish with English translations offered.

South Bay now seeks greater musical diversity. They are currently searching for an additional musician who could bring greater knowledge about spiritually grounded music from Mexican and Latin American cultures.

San Diego: What’s Ahead for First UU Hillcrest and South Bay?

South Bay may choose to remain a First UU satellite for some time to come.

Nevertheless, Straube believes that as South Bay continues to attract more Latino, Spanish-speaking families, the congregation’s own unique spiritual expression and bicultural needs might be best served as an eventual stand-alone congregation.

When South Bay is up and running as an independent church, First UU has plans for additional satellite start-up/church planting activities, which might begin with Coronado Island off the coast of San Diego.

Albuquerque Case Study: Delivering Church to Scattered Rural Populations

Rev. Christine Robinson, senior minister of First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque (FUCA) in New Mexico, had a sudden realization in the early 2000’s that the Albuquerque church, where she had served as senior minister since 1988, had grown to become a truly regional church. A zip code analysis revealed that approximately 60 church members, or roughly eight to 10 percent of the church’s total members, were traveling from as far away as Socorro (80 miles), Gallup (137 miles) or Roswell (200 miles), New Mexico, to attend worship and other church activities.

New Mexico is predominantly a rural state. Approximately 1 million people live within its two largest cities, Albuquerque and Santa Fe, and the other 1 million people are spread throughout a geographic region approximately the size of New England. Robinson conducted a more detailed zip code data search of the state using UUA data to locate clusters of people who might identify as Unitarian Universalists among the numerous small towns scattered throughout the desert,

mountains and rural rangeland of New Mexico. Results revealed several regions in the state south of Albuquerque, including Socorro, Ruidoso, Alamogordo, Las Cruces, Roswell, and Carlsbad, New Mexico.

None of these communities had enough Unitarian Universalists living in and around them to support the formation of a stand-alone church. However, Robinson believed that regional satellite outreach might work to bring currently isolated UUs and other religious liberals into relationship with Unitarian Universalism through FUCA.

As a child, Robinson attended River Road Unitarian Church in suburban Washington, D.C. at a time when the congregation met at an area school. She learned the story of how the Rev. A. Powell Davis, the minister of All Souls Unitarian Church downtown, used the latest technology of the late 1940s and early 1950s -- a telephone connection -- to deliver the audible portion of the All Soul's sermon to outlying church sites. According to a report in *UU World* magazine, under Davis' leadership, Washington-area Unitarians started eight new churches in little more than 10 years. Several of those congregations are among the largest congregations in the UUA today.²⁷ Robinson took this lesson of growth through technology to heart.

During a sabbatical in 2006, Robinson began to explore the possibility of organizing branches in selected rural New Mexico communities through the use of video and Internet technology to bring church closer to those who currently had no regular connection with a liberal religious community. In addition, her goal was to create a new model for UU extension efforts. Satellite campus growth using video and projection equipment had not been attempted prior to this in the UUA. Initial online research pointed Robinson towards evangelical multi-site churches for inspiration and resources.

Robinson was initially skeptical of the use of video to create a satisfactory worship experience. She visited the evangelical North Coast Church north of San Diego to experience multi-site church first hand, and was pleasantly surprised by

²⁷ Ross, Warren R., "Growing with Davies," *UU World*, Winter 2006. (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2006).

what she saw. “North Coast was extremely welcoming to newcomers – they practiced radical hospitality. Many of our own congregations could benefit from taking a page out of their welcoming play book,” she observed. “Most surprisingly, the use of video was extremely compelling. I was to learn later that the secret is to make sure the head size of the speaker is broadcast at a minimum of 110 percent of normal size, as that grabs and keeps people’s attention.”

Ministers at North Coast were eager to provide a personal backroom tour of their facilities, as well as share processes, procedures and other resources. Robinson returned to Albuquerque excited and briefed her board about what she had been learning. She did not want to move forward unless the board was fully committed to the idea.

From the start, Robinson envisioned the branch project not as a solution to address overcrowding at FUCA, but as the most cost-effective and environmentally sustainable way to address geographic distance to deliver church to prospective outlying worshippers. In addition, this expansion was not envisioned as a church-planting project. FUCA intended to create one church in multiple locations.

Plans provided for video recordings of FUCA sermons on DVD, or downloadable from the Web, to be shown at locally run weekly worship services held in these outlying communities. Video technology would not only serve worship needs in a rural branch setting, but might also meet the needs of people living in senior housing or on a college campus. In addition, the use of recorded video sermons could add additional services at the main church facility, such as Sunday afternoons or Wednesday evenings.

The congregation was enthusiastically behind the idea. A church-wide fundraiser garnered \$5,000 in seed money, while one family gave an additional start-up grant of \$2,500 to support the branch project in fall 2005.

According to a Leadership Network study, “The vast majority [of churches] made their foray into multisite at their original site first.”²⁸ This was certainly true at FUCA. The need to address overcrowding in 2006 at the 11:00 a.m. Sunday

²⁸ Bird, Warren, *Survey of 1,000 Multi-Site Churches*. Whitepaper (Dallas: Leadership Network, 2004), p. 4.

service created a first-hand opportunity to learn about the use of video filming and broadcast, prior to satellite launch. FUCA created a second, simultaneous Sunday worship service at 11:00 a.m. in the church's social hall using worship associates and a video of the sermon delivered at the earlier Sunday morning service.

The Video Café worship experience, now called Common Ground, created a loyal following of members who preferred the more intimate worship with far fewer people in the social hall than the larger service in the sanctuary. Video Café also provided some on-the-ground learning about the unique needs of small group worship.

"The humbling lesson learned at this stage was that everything I knew about worship was based on groups of 100 to 1,000 people. I had a lot to learn about small group worship," Robinson explained. "Big, formal church worship is silly when applied to only 10 people. We had to retrain our worship associates leading the Video Café, and rethink music for starters." The sharing of joys and sorrows and a sermon discussion section were also added to the Video Café social hall worship experience.

Robinson and her branch project team turned to the UUA in fall 2006 for two grants totaling \$80,000. In addition, FUCA raised additional funding through district chalice lighter grants to assist with some of the branch equipment costs. Robinson estimates that FUCA spent approximately \$50,000 initially to fund a part-time organizer as well as pay for advertising and travel to small towns to hold initial interest meetings. These funds also helped with development costs at the first two branches in Socorro, about 70 miles south of Albuquerque, and in Edgewood, approximately 30 miles east over the mountains.

On average, the churches surveyed by Leadership Network report that the biggest portion of their [multi-site] budget went to technology costs.²⁹ "Luckily, the Albuquerque congregation included a bunch of 'techie' types, including one video professional," Robinson said. "These folks knew how to make best use of our donated equipment. We had to invest in such things as a DVD player and projector

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 8.

as well as upgrades to our sound recording and broadcast equipment. We also had to upgrade to a larger, faster Web hosting site to be able to accommodate uploading sermons to our Website.”

In March 2007, Roger Hartz was hired as the part-time branch organizer. He began working in communities where FUCA already had existing members or had other existing relationships to begin soliciting interest in the formation of a branch. Invitations to attend initial exploratory meetings were advertised in local community newspapers.

A branch development process was defined, in which an interested group would walk through development steps towards the creation of a branch. Possible meeting places and times were explored. Volunteers were trained as small group worship leaders, which also included instructions on how to manage the technology needed to download and project the video sermon. A steering committee was formed for ongoing coordination and governance of the branch; an opening Sunday was selected and advertisements were placed in community newspapers to announce the first Sunday worship service.

The first branch congregation in Socorro began weekly public worship services in fall 2007. The Socorro congregation meets in the social hall of a tiny Episcopal church at 3:00 p.m. on Sundays. Average weekly worship attendance is approximately 25 to 30 people.

An East Mountains branch then formed in suburban Edgewood, approximately 30 miles away from Albuquerque over a mountain pass, with worship services held on the second and fourth Sundays of each month. Edgewood now meets every week in the classroom of a weaving shop at 10:00 a.m. Sundays. Since it is not technically possible for them to receive that same morning’s sermon in time, the Edgewood branch views the sermon from the previous week instead on DVD.

In the spring of 2009, a group of people in Carlsbad expressed an interest in joining First Unitarian. Carlsbad is nearly 400 miles away from Albuquerque. After several conversations and a visit, Carlsbad became FUCA’s third branch

congregation. The group started offering regular Sunday worship services at 4:00 p.m. in a local Presbyterian church in September 2009.

“It is our hope that the branches will offer four kinds of local programming,” Robinson explained. “Worship is mandatory – we don’t allow a branch to launch until they are ready to offer weekly worship services to the public. In addition, we want the branches to offer small group ministry, community service work and community-building fellowship opportunities.”

The FUCA religious education (RE) staff is available to equip and train volunteer leaders from each branch to provide RE at the local level. To date, only the Socorro branch had enough children to warrant forming an RE class. Tragically, that ended abruptly when the mother of three of those children died suddenly. Her unexpected loss was a terrible blow to the young faith community, and ministerial support from Albuquerque helped the congregation grieve her loss.

The RE classes at Socorro have not resumed to date, as they no longer have enough children coming regularly. Each branch has kits of materials to engage children during the sermon. Worship associates are also encouraged to find ways for young people to participate in the rest of the service. Children from the branches attend FUCA’s summer camp and teens are invited to become involved in specialized all-church youth events.

The ministers visit each branch several times a year to preach and lead classes. They also perform rites of passage at the branches, including weddings, memorial services and baby dedications. Pastoral care is handled through coordination with the local branch lay leaders. The ministers provide pastoral care primarily by phone, although there have also been personal visits, as needed.

In addition, FUCA board members and other lay leaders from Albuquerque make a point of attending worship at different branch sites throughout the year. The board has begun rotating its meeting sites to include each branch location at least once a year. The church is learning to use Internet-based tools, such as Skype, to include those from branch locations in FUCA’s annual meeting and other activities.

“We are one church. Let me emphasize that,” Robinson explained. “A branch is a subset of the entire congregation, just meeting at a distance. We think of our branches in the same way we think of other programs at the church with 10 to 40 people, such as the Wednesday night potluck group. The people who come to the potluck each week mostly belong to and pledge to the church. The church pays the cost of maintaining the social hall they use. The group puts articles in the newsletter. They take care of one another, but when someone at the potluck is struggling and might benefit from pastoral care, someone lets a minister know. If a very difficult person starts causing trouble, someone asks a minister for help. All the ministers drop in on the potluck from time to time. It’s exactly the same with the folks in Socorro, Edgewood and Carlsbad.”

First Unitarian provides ongoing training for worship associates and other volunteer lay leaders from all locations together, building camaraderie and support for one another church wide. Four worship associates are available at each branch. According to Robinson, they think of themselves as religious leaders and take their responsibilities very seriously. “The branch worship leaders tell us that this is among the most meaningful parts of their lives,” she said.

While First Unitarian remains open to future branch expansion, the congregation and ministerial team are currently focused on supporting the existing branches to help them grow and develop greater visibility and on-the-ground presence within their local communities.

Success for FUCA’s branch project has been measured not only by the ability to serve people who otherwise would not have the opportunity to be part of a UU faith community, but also to document the branch formation process and share learnings with other congregations throughout the UUA. First Unitarian was named a “Breakthrough Congregation” in 2009 and was invited to conduct a workshop in multi-site church for the General Assembly in Salt Lake City. As part of their goal to teach others, FUCA representatives have made numerous other presentations over the past five years at district and national UUA events and articles about Albuquerque’s multi-site branch program have been featured in printed and online UUA publications. Robinson also writes a blog about multi-site church as a way to

teach others about the process. Information about the branch program is also available on the FUCA Website, which also offers a link to online classes in multi-site church development.

“The success of this branch program demonstrates a new way to extend Unitarian Universalism into the less densely populated areas of our nation,” Robinson said. “But the branch model can also be used to serve senior housing, campus ministry, snowbird and sunbird communities and other places where our presence is not well-established. This format is able to bring an institutional presence and community gathering point into places where only conservative religious values have had a foothold for generations.”

Albuquerque: Unexpected Benefits of Video Outreach

According to Robinson, FUCA has seen a robust expansion of young adult members over the past five years, since they began to post podcasts and text files of sermons on the church Website. “I think we attract young adults because we look like a church that lives in the 21st Century,” she said. “Young adults can check us out fully on the Internet before they ever set foot in the door.” In addition, Robinson noted that FUCA has seen an increase in the number of young males joining the church. She believes one driver for that trend is because FUCA offers a “cool place” for young men to help out – the tech booth. “Our technies are a very tight community and include Millennials, Gen X’ers as well as Boomers,” she said.

FUCA experienced another unexpected side-benefit from its newfound video expertise. Robinson provided a district workshop on FUCA’s venture into multi-site church formation. A number of smaller congregations and lay-led fellowships appeared suspicious of the multi-site concept, as they did not wish to be affiliated with FUCA, but they were extremely interested in access to the pre-recorded sermons. As a result, FUCA set up an iMinistry subscription program, providing four video sermons a year, including DVDs, worship suggestions, readings and a text of the sermons, which cover “UU-101” topics. More than a dozen congregations currently subscribe.

Albuquerque: Captured Lessons Learned

In their initial planning stages, FUCA anticipated forming as many as nine branches throughout New Mexico. Once on the ground, they discovered the developmental process takes significantly longer than originally anticipated to move from the initial exploratory meetings through the start-up of weekly worship to becoming self-supporting at the branch level.

Most importantly, the church had not anticipated the resistance they received in some towns, especially in communities where former lay-led fellowships previously failed. Communities where there had been a prior UU presence, such as Roswell and Gallup, became difficult, if not impossible, to organize. The people who came to the initial organizing meetings were not only distrustful of FUCA, but also actively resentful of the church's presence and proposal to form a branch in their community. "One very promising town – Las Vegas, New Mexico – was 'stolen' from us. After our advertising campaign called people together, someone at the meeting convinced the 30 others that they didn't need our help. She convinced them that she could lead them to start a fellowship on their own," Robinson said. "Sadly, nothing ever came of that." As a result of these experiences, FUCA no longer reaches out to communities where past UU fellowships have failed.

Robinson also noted that it is impossible to underestimate the importance of the having healthy volunteer leaders on the ground at each site. "You need spark plugs – real energizer bunnies. It takes a lot of enthusiasm and energy to start things up and to keep it going," she said. "Unfortunately, small church environments, especially lay-led groups, can attract some unhealthy people who want to lead for all the wrong reasons, or want to stir things up and interfere with existing leadership. If a branch is to succeed and survive the antics of difficult people, you need confident, well-trained lay leaders who have all the tools they need to be effective in creating and sustaining a healthy small church environment. The minister also needs to check in with the branch leaders on a regular basis to discover issues and help them nip problems in the bud before they become larger, disruptive problems."

While the branches are lay led, ministerial presence is also a key factor for

success. “When Carlsbad first approached us about becoming a branch site, one of the first steps we had to take was to disempower some unhealthy leaders,” she said. “It is remarkable, in the end, how little intervention is needed to keep things on course. And, it is also remarkable how badly it can go if that little bit of ministerial intervention isn’t present. If a minister isn’t around, there is a leadership vacuum that can often get filled up fast with inappropriate people, unfortunately.”

Effective use of music has also been a challenge in a small group setting. First Unitarian uses local musicians to help provide worship support at the branches wherever possible. “We struggle with the worship leaders around the best choices for music in a small group setting,” Robinson explained. “They want to sing familiar hymns, but let’s face it: most of the songs in our hymnal can’t be sung by 10 people, even *with* accompaniment. Group singing needs to feel uplifting, not awkward. You have to hone your music selection to ‘sing around the campfire’ songs. We work to find simpler, more satisfying music that ordinary people can sing together with minimal accompaniment.”

In addition to branch outreach, FUCA experimented with a campus ministry outreach in 2011 at the University of New Mexico, using recorded sermons. First Unitarian had existing relationships with several college students who worked in the FUCA religious education program. The church tried gathering a campus group on several occasions, and even though some professors and university employees also came, the meetings failed to attract a critical mass of possible participants. In addition, there was a lack of student leadership potential needed to get a successful effort off the ground.

The branches are experiencing some of the same growth challenges that many small churches or fellowships experience. Visitors can be easily overwhelmed. Small groups make it difficult for visitors to slip in to sample worship unnoticed before deciding whether to return. Visitor comfort is especially difficult when chairs are set up in a small circle for worship and participation requires sitting in such an intimate setting as a stranger among others who tend to know one another well. In addition, visitors can often be welcomed in and asked to help out before they are comfortable in their commitment to ongoing involvement. In

addition, some branch members are resistant to growth beyond the immediate intimacy of the familiar small group, despite lip service to the contrary. Visitor welcoming training has been done at the branches to help address hurdles that might inhibit newcomer growth.

“The greatest challenge in this entire effort has not been the technical logistics,” she said, “but has involved the fundamental change of self-understanding of the First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque. We have added ‘multi-site’ to our DNA, budget by budget, job description by job description, communication strategy by communication strategy. This growth process changes who you are as a faith community and how you think about church and about how you now serve your membership in fundamentally different ways you couldn’t even imagine at the outset. Multi-church success is entirely possible, but success without change at your organization’s very core is not possible.”

Houston: Multi-Site Church Answers the Call to Help Shrinking Congregations

Rev. Dr. Daniel O’Connell accepted the call to First Unitarian Universalist Church in Houston, Texas, in 2010, taking the reigns as the church was continuing to recover from a bitter separation from its prior ministerial team. Membership at First Church had dropped from nearly 600 to a little more than 300 during the previous ministerial tenure and interim period, and O’Connell brought hope for rebuilding to his ministry.

As part of membership growth planning, O’Connell asked staff and volunteers to create a map of the 550-square-mile greater Houston area with pins placed to represent where current members lived. He was surprised to see the number of people who drove more than 20 miles to participate in worship and other activities at First Church, the oldest UU church in Houston, located immediately south of downtown in the Museum District.

“Committed members are willing to drive, 20, 25 or 30-plus miles to come to church. Unfortunately, an ‘ask your friends and neighbors to come to church’ campaign was not going to work, as it is highly unlikely a first timer would be

willing to travel that distance just to check out a new church,” O’Connell remembered thinking.

O’Connell was interested in multi-site church as a prospective growth model, and believed it was particularly well suited to expand congregational outreach within the widespread geography of the greater Houston area. He spent time talking with Rev. Peter Morales and Rev. Terry Sweetser at the UUA, Rev. Arvid Straube of San Diego and Rev. Christine Robinson in Albuquerque to learn more about the successes and challenges UU churches were experiencing with satellite campus outreach.

According to O’Connell, while the number of UU congregations in the greater Houston area grew from six to eight over the past 25 years, the number of UUs in the area, approximately 5,000, had remained about the same as the general population of Houston increased dramatically during that same time. As a faith movement, Unitarian Universalism was missing out on outreach and membership growth opportunities in Houston.

O’Connell put together a presentation about the concept of multi-site church and gave a short talk at a fall 2011 meeting of the Houston Metro Strategic Planning Group, which included ministerial and lay leadership from each of the eight UU congregations in the Houston area cluster. Cluster leadership became excited by the concept, including representatives from two Houston area congregations who were each experiencing financial struggles and a dramatic decline in membership. These two congregations included the Northwest Community UU Church (NWCUUC) in northwest Houston and the Thoreau UU Congregation (TUUC), located southwest of town in a neighboring county.

Both churches had experienced recent hardships. Mold was found in NWCUUC’s rented building and the congregation was given approximately 30 days to pack up and vacate the contaminated premises. They found a new location approximately half the previous building’s size. In addition, the one-quarter-time minister announced his leaving. Congregational membership dropped 59 percent in that time, from 78 adults to only 46. According to NWCUUC Board President Bil Cusak, after 16 years of dreaming of having a full-time minister and their own

church building, the Northwest congregation realized they were in trouble and unable to gain the traction they needed to achieve critical mass. Survival required thinking of outside-the-box options.

When O'Connell preached as a guest at NWCUUC in December 2011, he was approached afterwards by Cusak, who expressed interest in wanting to explore the possibility of Northwest Community becoming a satellite campus of First Church. A confidentiality agreement was signed and conversations between O'Connell and the NWCUUC board began, with blessings from the executive committee of First Church's board of trustees.

Simultaneously, Thoreau was experiencing continuous membership decline, lacking sufficient funds to attract and hire full-time ministerial leadership needed to re-establish stability and help the congregation get back on its feet. Unfortunately, during a church capital construction project following Hurricane Rita, a building contractor absconded with a huge amount of the church's capital campaign funds and left unfinished construction work. The congregation had been in a downward spiral ever since.

O'Connell heard a rumor at year-end 2011 that Thoreau planned to hold a strategic planning meeting in February 2012 to evaluate and choose the best strategy from a number of options to ensure survival going forward. Among those options was the possibility of becoming a satellite of First Church. O'Connell contacted the then-interim minister at Thoreau, Rev. Lillie Henley, who encouraged him to talk directly with the TUUC board of trustees. O'Connell and the Rev. Leonora Montgomery, a member of First Church, made a presentation about the multi-site church concept to Thoreau's board in January 2012 and serious discussions began. Thoreau's board overwhelmingly voted to pursue satellite campus status with First Church at their February meeting.

Church growth through merger is a growing trend. According to a Leadership Network survey, more than one-third of today's multi-site expansions

add a campus through merging with a congregation in trouble.³⁰ Research shows that roughly 80 percent of the 300,000 Protestant churches in the United States have plateaued or are declining.³¹ This is driving mergers at a time when every denomination is experiencing significant declines in membership, as new generations of “unchurched” Americans decline to become involved in traditional religious organizations.

In *Better Together*, the authors point out that a number of past mergers failed because they were driven by no more than a desperate desire to survive. Today’s church mergers tend to succeed when they are mission driven, in which one or more churches choose to embrace and join the vision and strategy of a stronger nearby church culture.³²

Church consultant Lyle Schaller notes a particularly interesting part of this growing merger trend that has particular applications to the Houston merger opportunity. He states, “The best merger success stories tend to be when three congregations – rather than the more common pattern of two – come together to create a new congregation...”³³

The decision to pursue merging three Houston congregations into one church, with one board and one budget serving multiple locations, began to proceed quickly on all fronts. O’Connell and the executive committee brought First Church’s full board of trustees up to speed, resulting in overwhelming enthusiastic board support for the merger effort to proceed. Because First Church would not be acquiring real estate debt or other fiscal liabilities in the merger, the First Church board vote was considered sufficient legal authorization for O’Connell to continue working through merger issues with the boards from Northwest Community and Thoreau. A congregational vote of approval would not be required under policy governance procedures.

³⁰ Bird, Warren and Kristen Walters. *Multisite is Multiplying*. Whitepaper. (Dallas: Leadership Network, 2010), p. 9.

³¹ Tomberlin, Jim and Warren Bird, *Better Together: Making Church Mergers Work*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Imprint, 2012), pp. 16-17.

³² *Ibid*, p. xvi.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 18.

Both NWCUUC and TUUC held town hall meetings in late February 2012 to present the satellite merger concept with their respective congregations, which was enthusiastically received. As a result, both congregations' boards voted officially to proceed with merger talks with First Church.

A special informational congregational meeting was called in early March 2012 at First Church to introduce the multi-site growth concept to the congregation and to provide history about discussions between First Church, Northwest Community and Thoreau. Next steps were defined. Talks would continue, albeit at a slower, more deliberate pace, to give greater consideration as issues around finances, staffing, programming, social justice outreach, facilities and more were to be identified and discussed. Thoreau, for example, has created a Multi-Site Church Issues tracking list that is currently up to five pages long of concerns and questions that need addressing prior to a merger.

Transition tasks forces at each location were formed and meet regularly to identify and talk through key issues and possible solutions. O'Connell acknowledges that completing the mergers sometime in 2013 will be complex, but entirely attainable, with the right commitment on everyone's part to make things work. "At this point, we consider ourselves engaged to one another," he explained. "But we aren't married quite yet. We are taking the time we need for courtship -- to be in ongoing discussions to make sure we identify whatever sticky issues need to surface, and to work through those issues to the best of everyone's abilities to achieve buy-in. So far, no deal killers have surfaced, and we don't expect them to."

Leadership from all three churches acknowledge that, just as in marriage, flexibility and respect will be required to evaluate how well the marriage is working, and to be able to tweak processes, procedures and approaches along the way to ensure the merger marriage will continue to work for all three campuses involved.

This is the first time in UUA history that separate organizations are asking to become satellites of a large, central urban church. Traditional church seeding involves a large congregation forming the outlying satellite campuses. Therefore, one of the biggest challenges for this new reverse satellite growth model will be the ability to merge three separate stand-alone churches, with their own unique

histories and cultures, into a single church with shared DNA, culture, vision and values. No one expects that to happen overnight.

O'Connell identified the following core ministries as essential to meet the needs of the current members, as well as encourage healthy development and future growth of each campus: faith formation for children, youth and adults; worship; pastoral care; stewardship; and social justice. It was considered essential that there be sufficient ministerial, staff and volunteer leadership in place at each campus to ensure that these five core ministries are operational from the start. Prior to the official merger, First Church worked out service agreements to provide help in these five areas on a contracted basis. First Church hired two part-time campus ministers who began serving Thoreau and Northwest Community on-site as of August 2012. Each satellite is reimbursing First Church for their part-time minister's salary. Part-time ministerial responsibilities, which include staffing office hours on-site and preaching one or more weekends a month, are expected to expand into full-time ministry as membership at the satellites grow.

Worship at all three sites will be organized around the same monthly theme. The two full-time ministers from First Church meet regularly with the two new part-time campus ministers to plan which minister might be interested in preaching on what particular angle of the monthly worship theme at which location. While coordination between the ministerial staff is essential, one objection has been raised to date expressing concern that this team level of sermon content planning potentially interferes with freedom of the pulpit – a minister's right to decide the content of whatever he or she will preach.

Plans to revive small group ministry at all locations is in the works. Called Growth Groups, these adult spirituality groups are being actively promoted and formed throughout the fall 2012. All four ministers will be rotating among the different campuses to help these groups get off to a good start. Shared training is also a key focus for the remainder of 2012, bringing together staff and volunteers from all three locations to be trained as small group and healthy congregations team facilitators, as well as establishing and training campus leadership in pastoral care, social justice, stewardship, leadership development and policy governance.

The directors of religious education at each site have been meeting collaboratively beginning in the summer months of 2012, to define existing programming at each site, as well as to identify future lifespan programming goals, shared program development, and teacher training needs going forward. Synergies and cost savings are expected as children and adult programming is leveraged across multiple campuses.

Administrators from the different locations have also been in conversation with one another, identifying existing processes, procedures and software tools to help define opportunities to cut costs and streamline shared operations through administrative, purchasing and financial management synergies. Music leaders from each congregation have also met together to discuss swapping music programs from campus to campus throughout the year.

Businesses merge to realize financial gains from expanded market reach at lower costs and on a faster timeline than a business would spend developing and expanding into the same market share on its own. One of the stickiest issues involved in both business and church mergers are what happen to staff at the various locations. In most business mergers, employee needs come after financial considerations. In church mergers, it becomes an even more delicate issue, as many of the church staff has developed close long-term relationships with members of the congregation. People have come to expect businesses to put money before people, but different expectations drive staffing decisions in a church setting, where congregants expect people's needs to come before financial considerations. This makes staffing decisions and transitions extremely delicate in a non-profit church merger environment.³⁴ Currently, there are no plans to cut staff at any location, although that could change either pre- or post-merger, as determined by O'Connell, the senior minister.

First Church staff seems skeptical at this point about how the shared multi-site administrative, financial management, religious education, and worship coordination will work. Part of that skepticism rests in the current uncertainty

³⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 83-87.

around what will be expected differently from each of the staff members and how their job functions will change as a result of the merger.

Final merger implementation is currently on target to become completed in Spring 2013. At that time, official votes will be taken by Northwest Community and Thoreau to legally dissolve themselves as stand-alone organizations. Upon legal dissolution, members of both congregations will automatically become members of First Church. Current thinking is that members will be encouraged to continue attending worship and other activities at their primary campus site, with members of First Church who may live closer to one of the satellite locations invited to visit and consider attending that site, if desired. Among other issues that have been raised to date, but have not yet been decided include everything from possible name changes to what technology investments will be needed to be able to stream sermons live or to broadcast previously recorded sermons on DVD to the satellite campus sites.

Church merger experts warn that mergers are not free of conflict as church cultures transition to become something different than they were before. "...that situation seems predictable: any time you merge two distinct cultures, whether under positive or less-pleasant circumstances, there is a chance of conflict, hurt feelings, overlapping power structures, mixed identities, and so on."³⁵

Many organizations underestimate the pain that happens in transition. According to change management consultant William Bridges, "It isn't the changes that do you in, it's the transitions. They aren't the same thing. Change is situational. ...Transition, on the other hand, is psychological; it is a three-phase process that people go through as they internalize and come to terms with the details of the new situation that the change brings about."³⁶

Bridges' three-phase transition process begins by defining the "ending," with leaders making clear what is ending and what is not. Then, organizations move through a neutral zone where everything is different. He calls this the "tunnel of

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 88.

³⁶ Bridges, William, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*. (Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 2003), p. 3.

chaos.” Then comes the new beginning, where people stop focusing backward and face the future together.³⁷

Failure to release control is a common landmine identified with church mergers. All three Houston-area churches recognize that the merger represents a significant paradigm shift in decision-making control for the mergee congregations. The transition planning task forces, for example, have identified that with change comes loss of all kinds, which will require shared grief work to be ministered to in the transition process.

“This merger represents an enormous opportunity for all three UU congregations,” O’Connell said. “It is an historic opportunity, as we have the possibility of forming a new growth model for the entire Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. The key vision question before all of us is our ongoing willingness to spread and grow our faith in Houston using the multi-site concept. Success depends on our willingness to follow-through on this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that just landed in all of our laps.”

Multi-Site Church and Unitarian Universalism: A Match with Challenges

Unitarian Universalism faces tremendous hurdles if it is going to remain a vibrant, active faith-based force for good and justice in the world going forward. Most traditional denominations report church membership and worship attendance in serious decline over the past 30 years. While the number of Unitarian Universalists has remained virtually unchanged over that same time period, it is cold comfort. Our denomination remains small, with approximately 160,000 adult members throughout North America. Unitarian Universalism has failed to grow in proportion to overall population growth. Our denomination has failed to attract many of those leaving other denominations, nor have we attracted many of today’s younger “unchurched” generation. The majority of our congregations remain small, with only 100 members or less, and many of these congregations and fellowships are

³⁷ Tomberlin, Jim and Warren Bird, *Better Together: Making Church Mergers Work*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Imprint, 2012), p. 100.

aging in place. Congregations who fail to attract new members of all ages are ultimately doomed to stagnate, and face possible closure.

If the denomination wishes to expand its presence, our churches must be more effective at reaching out to and attracting a greater number of people to participate in church and social justice activities. Multi-site church growth, including church mergers, represents a wonderful opportunity to expand not only the reach of Unitarian Universalism beyond its predominantly urban environments, but also to help stabilize and re-energize smaller congregations and lay-led fellowships experiencing membership stagnation or decline.

However, greater widespread adoption of multi-site growth among UUs may face some uphill battles based on attitudes, beliefs and concerns held by some members of the denomination. Potentially limiting factors may include, but are not limited to the following challenges raised. Additional discussion of these issues is encouraged to overcome hurdles that limit denominational growth, including intentional growth strategies such as multi-site expansion or church mergers:

- *A distrust of anything associated with evangelical churches.* Satellite campus church growth has been associated predominantly with the spread of conservative, non-denominational, evangelical mega-churches beginning in the 1980s. An inherent distrust of anything evangelical among religious liberals such as Unitarian Universalists certainly may lead to pushback and suspicion of the multi-site church growth concept. Several of the UU multi-site church growth pioneers have experienced that suspicion and pushback first hand from parishioners and other regional churches.
- *Unitarian Universalists seem to have a difficult time supporting the concept of church itself, let alone multi-site church.* In a whitepaper titled *Congregations and Beyond*, UUA President Rev. Peter Morales points out that our congregations have only 160,000 adult members, and yet more than 650,000 people identify themselves as Unitarian Universalists. He

stresses that three out of every four people who consider themselves UUs fail to actually belong to or support a church.³⁸ The Albuquerque branch program demonstrates that satellite outreach can be an effective way to reach UUs and other religious liberals who live far from existing congregations. However, geographic distance challenges alone cannot account for the fact that 75 percent of UUs are not currently active in a congregation. Growth strategies of all kinds, not just multi-site satellite outreach, are needed to attract existing UUs to a congregational commitment. If only one-third of these “unchurched” UUs joined a congregation, denomination membership would double.

- *As a non-creedal faith, Unitarian Universalists do not rally around a sense of mission or call to spread the faith.* Unlike their Christian counterparts, a significant majority of UUs are not driven to spread their faith with missional fervor in order to save souls from eternal damnation. And, yet, many UUs can speak firsthand to the transformational power Unitarian Universalism has in changing individual lives, and the world at large, for the better. UUs have their own “good news” story of loving acceptance and justice seeking to share. Many who have left other denominations, other religious liberals and those who consider themselves “spiritual, but not religious” might find spiritual nurturing and growth through involvement in the UU faith. If the denomination is to thrive, UUs must get serious about intentional growth. They must rethink and reframe traditional Christian mission-driven outreach motivators into causes and values that rally, excite and “call” Unitarian Universalists. The ministers in Albuquerque and San Diego were able to do that successfully, generating congregational buy-in and enthusiastic involvement around the mission to deliver church to geographically isolated people or the mission to reach out to build relationships in a multi-ethnic, multi-

³⁸ Morales, Rev. Peter, *Congregations and Beyond*. Whitepaper. (Boston: Unitarian Universalists Association, 2012) p. 1.

cultural part of the community, respectively. Ministerial leadership in Houston has been successful in framing the merger opportunity around a mission to strengthen and spread the growth of Unitarian Universalism throughout the greater Houston area. Opportunities abound within the denomination to encourage greater discussion among UUs on the importance and necessity of growth and outreach, and to help define the values and motivations that might “call” UUs to spread their faith.

- *Congregational polity may serve to hamper rather than promote denominational growth.* The strongest governing authority within Unitarian Universalism rests in each individual, stand-alone church. In fact, Unitarian Universalism is not a denomination, per se. The UUA is an association of independently governed congregations in covenant to help support one another. With the exception of a few church-planting experiments attempted by the UUA, there is no denomination-led effort for growth outreach. Instead, the majority of UU growth is initiated at the congregational level. Given that the majority of all congregations in the UUA have less than 100 members,³⁹ very few UU churches have the financial or staffing resources to initiate sustainable outreach activities. Only 32 of all UUA member churches have membership of 550 people or more. This represents about 4 percent of all UU faith communities with the potential resources to initiate intentional growth outreach, such as the multi-site campus programs being implemented in Albuquerque and San Diego. Can these top 32 congregations by themselves make a significant difference spreading the presence of Unitarian Universalism beyond the borders of the large urban communities in which most reside?

- *UUA resources for growth planning are decentralized throughout the organization, making it difficult to discover institutional knowledge about*

³⁹ Walton, Christopher L., “What size are Unitarian Universalist congregations?” *UU World*, Winter 2011. (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2011).

growth activities happening throughout the denomination. Currently, there is no UUA staff leadership dedicated exclusively to church or denominational growth. Rather, interest in and knowledge of different growth activities happening throughout the UUA are scattered among a number of UUA staff. The UUA offers grants to congregations proposing growth projects, but available grant monies exist within more than one department. There is no central clearinghouse for funding growth through the UUA. Denominational online resources related to growth are also scattered throughout the Website. While there are a variety of articles and discussions posted that claim growth is a desirable and necessary thing for healthy congregations, there is no denominational call for growth of the faith. Should there be? Currently, the UUA lists no multi-site church growth resources on its Website. Knowledge of multi-site growth work and the merger opportunity in Houston is spreading most rapidly through word of mouth, and through presentations given by the respective leaders at district, large church and other national conferences, including General Assembly. If the denomination would like to encourage greater growth, should there be a staff person dedicated to denominational growth to help serve as a knowledge and resource clearinghouse? What on-the-ground support resources should also be available at the district level to help spur greater intentional growth?

- *Big is often considered bad, or at least suspect, among many UUs.* Some people become increasingly distrustful of an organization or institution the larger it becomes. In many UUA districts, there are huge size disparities between the large urban churches and the majority of other mid- to smaller-sized congregations in a region. Tensions exist along size-related fault-lines, including fear of dominance by a larger congregation. If big is often considered bad, or untrustworthy, than to expand from there may be seen as even more worrisome. Some in the denomination may consider multi-site growth suspect because it is being

undertaken by some of the largest churches in the denomination. Virtually every church involved in a satellite experiment experienced distrust and suspicion from the mid- to smaller-sized congregations and lay-led fellowships within their respective clusters. Fear and distrust of the satellite concept was expressed directly at the district level – one multi-site growth minister was specifically warned to stay away from other nearby communities for future growth. An nearby minister of a smaller congregation considered those areas “his territory.” The big church was already big enough, and did not need to expand further into the surrounding community, as far as this colleague was concerned. These attitudes reflect a lack of shared vision about the need for continuous growth as a denomination, as total overall membership remains stagnant or declines in some regions. It is tragic that some individual UUs actually sabotaged the creation of a new satellite fellowship opportunity in a community near Albuquerque where people turned out because they *were* interested in creating one. Our larger congregations have more resources to help spur additional growth – why are their intentions and resources so distrusted? What would need to change to garner greater system-wide cooperation?

- *Some UU congregants and congregations seem to resist growth.* There is a misperception that the larger a church becomes, the more impersonal it is. Yet the experiences learned from some of the most successful evangelical mega-churches demonstrates that is not automatically the case. As noted by a visiting UU minister doing research on multi-site growth at a mega-church, some of these large congregations provide significant lessons in radical, welcoming hospitality. These large churches can be far more effective than most UU churches in not only welcoming, but also in following someone from initial visit through orientation, placement into a small group church activity to membership and ongoing church involvement. According to studies cited by the UUA

in the whitepaper *Congregational Growth in Unitarian Universalism*, a congregation must add between three to five percent of new members annually just to replace members lost each year to transfer or death. Despite healthy rates of visitation, UU congregations grow, on average, at the rate of about one new member per year.⁴⁰ According to the UUA, some congregations believe they have reached the “perfect size” and stop trying to grow any further. The fear is that if they add more newcomers, they will lose the sense of close-knit community that has been built. The report states, “It is clear that those congregations that are intentionally welcoming to visitors will grow numerically. ...Only when our movement takes seriously the call to offer ‘radical hospitality’ to the newcomer – to offer clear information and the opportunity to connection – will we be able to claim healthy growth.”⁴¹

The need for ongoing, healthy growth, including intentional outreach expansion, remains an important issue, filled with challenges for Unitarian Universalists. Multi-site church growth consultants believe that multi-site, multi-venue church will become the “new normal,” replacing many of the single venue churches of the past. They estimate that more than 30,000 American churches will become multi-site within the next few years.⁴² Shouldn’t more of those new multi-site churches be healthy, thriving Unitarian Universalist congregations? May we be limited only by the boundaries of available technology and our imaginations.

⁴⁰ Unitarian Universalist Association, *Congregational Growth in Unitarian Universalism*. (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2005), p. 12

⁴¹ *Ibid*, pp. 15-16.

⁴² Surratt, Geoff, Greg Ligon and Warren Bird, *Multisite Church Road Trip: Exploring the New Normal*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), p. 11.