

UCG Feb 27, 2011

Blessed to be a Witness

As part of our “Burning Questions” theme, the ministers asked for me to give my perspective on UCG from the view of my role as moderator – what have I noticed over the past year, and what do I see coming down the line? Perhaps the first burning question is, what exactly does the Moderator do here? To some extent, it reminds me of being chair of a church board or committee, it’s just that the membership of the board is a little bigger. One of the great things about being Moderator is that you get to see the church from a number of different perspectives – through your usual lens as a member, through interactions with the different boards and committees, and through direct work and interaction with the clergy and church staff.

One issue that has arisen frequently during the last year is our size – we are a growing church, which is an unusual thing for most congregations these days. When Cindy and I joined UCG in 2001, the church had 569 members. Our most recent membership count shows that we now have 712 members, an increase of about 25%. Most of that growth has occurred over the past five years, when we’ve experienced rates of growth on the order of 3-5% per year. We have crossed the threshold into “large church” territory. There has been a lot of discussion about growth in church boards and committees over the last few years, and we have reviewed what the research says about some of the pitfalls and challenges that face churches that are in our situation, of growing from medium to large size. One issue is that growth will stagnate unless congregations like ours come to terms with our identity as a complex organization where everyone doesn’t know everyone else

and not everyone can be cared for by a single pastor. Another is that churches need to create enough programs of excellent quality to attract new members. There need to be numerous groups, classes, and cells available for becoming and remaining involved. In Larry's words, these churches need to grow smaller as they grow larger. Finally, the research shows that at the phase we're in, growth becomes related to the capacity of the staff and the capacity of the physical facilities, both of which are largely a function of the size of the budget.

This limitation occurs because at some point, the ability of volunteer lay leadership to run all church programs becomes too much, and additional staff support becomes necessary. We have already seen this occur in the past few years as new staff lines have been added for our fiscal and children's programs and choir leadership. At the same time, the physical infrastructure must be able to handle the increased demands of larger membership. As it stands now, we run out of room most Sundays to house our growing United Tribes and adult program activities.

I stood here before you a month and a half ago and used this research and this line of reasoning to introduce the supplemental pledge campaign. Parenthetically, I forgot to mention that another important job of the Moderator is to help shake down the congregation for more money. But as I pondered this line of reasoning further, I had reason to pause. If you think back over what I've said, all of these statements implicitly or explicitly assume that growth of the church is one of our ultimate goals, that growing membership is one of the key signs of a successful church. But is this necessarily the case? There are a lot of problems with growth – the potential to become more anonymous to each other, the financial strains on our members to support growing needs, increasing workloads for our paid staff, lay leadership, and volunteers, and the physical demands on our infrastructure. In fact,

these assumptions about growth struck me as being suspiciously similar to our cultural assumptions and paradigms about economic growth – that growth in the economy is our only model for success as a society. I am not a sophisticated enough economic thinker to analyze our country’s growth paradigm, but I do know that many people smarter than I am have questioned this paradigm because of the impact that economic growth has on our finite resources. Should we at UCG assume that growth is a given, that the only way to remain vital is to get bigger? It’s not necessarily true that having a level membership would result in stagnation – each year, we lose several dozen members to natural attrition – folks moving to other cities or just moving on to other things. So maintaining constant membership still entails bringing on quite a few new members each year, all of whom bring energy, richness, and new ideas to our congregation. This several-times-a-year injection of new members could certainly maintain most of the vitality of our congregation even while our membership remained constant.

I’ve discussed some of these doubts and issues with the ministers and with other members, and I think I’ve gained some insight and perspective. Probably the first consideration is that this dichotomy that I’ve set up of grow versus not grow is a bit of a false one; we could probably no easier stop UCG from growing than we could stop Andy’s beard from growing. If we decided we wanted to limit the growth of our church, who would be the first person that we turned away? UCG clearly meets a need in our community, and our growth is a reflection of that. Someday we may exhaust the pool of folks looking for a progressive church, but that day is not in sight yet.

That leads me to my second point. As one of the few progressive churches in Alachua County, we have a responsibility to maintain safe harbor for fellow open-

minded seekers. Vince has told me that he has found our LGBT members to be among the strongest evangelists in our midst. Vince often hears from them that there remains much suffering in our community due to the persistent, unholy perceptions of God and religion as it pertains to sexual orientation. In my mind, the struggle for the inclusion of our LGBT friends in the full life of our society is the civil rights struggle of this generation. The United Church of Christ and its Congregational predecessors has a long history of standing for justice even (or especially) when society wasn't quite ready. I think most of us have heard the firsts associated with our denomination: In 1700, Congregationalist minister Samuel Sewall wrote the first anti-slavery pamphlet in America entitled "The Selling of Joseph", and the denomination remained a strong voice for abolition through the next two centuries. The Congregational Church was the first protestant denomination, in 1785, to ordain an African American minister, and ordained the first female Christian pastor in 1853. It's no accident that when UCG's founders were looking for a denomination to join, that they chose the United Church of Christ. UCG and our focus on social justice are a natural fit in the long and unbroken UCC /Congregationalist heritage of doing the right thing.

What I conclude from this is that the growth of our church is probably an inevitable consequence of who we are and the role we serve in our community. So are we prepared to face the challenges that will arise as we grow? As you could probably guess, my answer is "yes". Our ability to overcome these challenges lies within ourselves. The wisdom, vision, and good humor of our congregation will make this work.

The depth of wisdom at UCG was demonstrated to me when I was serving on that bastion of UCG wisdom and compassion, the Board of Business. I had assembled

a list of the startup costs associated with hiring a new associate minister for adult programs and pastoral care. The list was long, and included overlap salary with Sandy, a down payment loan, interview costs, and new office space. The sum at the bottom of the page amounted to more than \$50,000, and I was a bit frozen in my tracks. Where would we ever find the money to get this done? Fortunately, the other members of BoB were not frozen in their tracks, and together we brainstormed ideas for funding the package, and we ended up with a creative mix that included raiding various small pockets of money, directing that year's endowment proceeds to the cause, and carrying out a small capital campaign to build some new office space. In the end, the solution worked well, we pulled the money together, and we ended up with a new associate minister that has enriched and enlivened our church.

This kind of thing happens often enough that it shouldn't surprise me anymore. Any of a number of times during my service on boards or council I've encountered issues that seemed very difficult to face as I looked at them on paper, but that became quite surmountable when discussed with fellow UCGer's across a table. I am convinced that this depth and diversity of intelligence, wisdom, and positive attitude is one of the real strengths of our congregation.

So what about that problem of the sustainable economic growth paradigm? I have come to realize that for me, my family probably serves as a better model for thinking about church growth than does the U.S. economy . I still remember standing in a darkened ultrasound room next to Cindy as our physician told us we were going to have twins – again. I'm a little ashamed to say that my immediate reaction was anger. Anger that Cindy's body was going to be ravaged by another twin pregnancy. Anger that we were likely looking at another premature birth and

extended stays in the hospital. Anger that our financial resources, and my relationship with Cindy and with our older twin boys, were all likely to be sorely strained by this event. And I was right – all of those things did indeed happen. But the other thought that I had that day, which followed immediately after the anger, was also right – I knew on that day that whatever happened, these new children were going to be a part of my family, and that I would love them more than life itself. In a growing family, financial and infrastructure and other concrete, real life problems have to be addressed and overcome – in our case that means bunk beds and big vehicles and lots of chairs at the dining room table. But the fundamental fact that makes it all possible and makes it all work is that our capacity for love is unbounded. As we bring new people into our lives, our love is not spread more thinly, it is multiplied and reflected back to us. That has been a core truth in my unexpectedly large family, and I am convinced it is a core truth for us here at UCG.

I think that if we remain true to ourselves and to our Compact, we will continue to attract new members and to grow, and that along with that will come all of the growing pains that I discussed earlier. But I am equally convinced that the wisdom and the love and the vision that I have witnessed in this congregation are the resources that we need. Yes, we need money, too, but money is merely a vehicle for achieving our dreams and our visions.

As your Moderator this year, I have been blessed to be a witness to all that is remarkable about UCG; our support of each other in times of need; our strong organizational structure that makes it possible to get everything done; our ever changing but consistently high quality worship experiences; our sharing of God's love with our neighbors. I am truly blessed to be a witness to the gifts that each of you brings to our congregation, and to the difference that this growing church has made in my life.

Please join me in prayer

Dearest God, we come before you humbled by the blessings in our lives. The bounty of the earth's fields and forests, oceans and streams provide all that our bodies require. Our friends and families receive our love and give back love in return. And we are blessed to belong to a spiritual community that accepts us as we are, but that also challenges us to seek out truths that are larger than ourselves. We pray that as we plan for our church's future, we will be guided by your love and compassion, and that as we grow larger, we will at the same time grow closer to you. We pray with the confidence that as we face new challenges, we have each other to lean on, and that you will be there with us. May it ever be so. Amen.