

From 70 – 700 in 37 Years
Success Stories
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Isaiah 58:6-12
Matthew 25:1-13

When I was a kid I was a complete car nut, as were my dad, my Uncle Alvin, and my cousin Jon Marc. The big thing among car nuts was how quickly a car could go from 0-60 mph. In 1964 my dad bought the first of the notorious muscle cars, a 348 hp Pontiac GTO, largely because the dealer told him he was too old for such a car. A GTO could go from 0-60 in 6.9 seconds... approximately. That was fast.

Ironically, after years of adolescent poring over Hot Rod magazines, I bought my 1929 Model A Ford from my Uncle Alvin, a car which could make it from 0-45 mph in 45 seconds. Sixty was only an occasional possibility with a tailwind going downhill.

UCG has grown from about 70 members when Sandy and I arrived in 1974 to 700 members as of this past June. That's uncommon. Churches tend to explode in growth or get to about 100 members and get stuck.

UCG's growth speed, the Model A, and the story of the tortoise and the hare have something in common. UCG and my Model A are the tortoises. They're both still going. The GTO, the bunny, is long gone. Many flash in the plan fast growth churches have flamed out. For example, Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral, the prototype of the run bunny run, mega church, is now bankrupt. Not that I gloat. It's just a fact.

The scripture story of the wise and foolish bridesmaids has all kinds of strange elements. I've already told you my favorite jokes about this story. But underneath the jokes, it is a story of how faith demands long lasting faithfulness, staying preparing, keeping our lamps trimmed and burning for the long haul.

Here are ten elements that I think contributed to UCG's long lasting faithfulness and its slow, tortoise-like growth.

First, UCG rose from the vitality of its people's dreams. Unlike most new churches where a minister is sent by their denomination to gather a church, UCG began with a few folks from both the university and the community putting an ad in the Alligator asking if anyone would like to start a liberal Protestant church in Gainesville. Yes they used the "L" word, back when Alachua County schools and most churches were not yet integrated, the civil rights movement was smoldering, and the Vietnam War was escalating.

Fifty people showed up at the old student union. They formed into a committee to write the compact, which Sandy will speak more of next week, and then shopped for a denomination that would accept them. The United Church of Christ welcomed them.

From the beginning and forever since, UCG was and is a church of congregational energy. Notice the buzz in this place as the service begins, through coffee time, and anywhere we gather. There is a statement attributed to Gandhi which we the ministers of UCG often quote, "Look there go my people. I must hurry and catch up with them, because I am their leader." You the people of this church are the grass roots power.

Second, however, you have always respected our right to lead and challenge you as well. Before I met with the search committee for this church, I spoke with Chuck Burns, the Florida UCC Conference minister. He told me to do one thing: "Get that group to talk about God."

Then as now, while clearly committed to activism and social justice, UCG had an ambiguous relationship with God. When the search committee asked me to state my belief in God, I asked first to hear each of theirs. They went around the circle, each sharing with a grand variety of faith and non-faith, questions and affirmations, just as we would if we sat in any circle of UCG members today.

Bob Atkins, one of the founders of this church who was also on the search committee, said that if I could get that group talking about God, I could handle the job of being their pastor, even if I was just twenty-nine years old at the time.

You have always respected our right as pastors to challenge you, push you back to your own questions, and lead you in new paths.

Third, we avoid secrets. Secrets are the most destructive forces in any family system, and we the ministers make a promise in this church that there will be no secrets, no subterfuge, and no surprises in how we deal with each other and with you.

When we talk about the budget today at our congregational meeting, the whole thing is an open book. There aren't many churches our size that list every detail of every staff member's salary. Everything we do here is in the sunshine.

Fourth, I remember being at a church growth workshop where the leaders consistently advised us to avoid controversial issues in our preaching if we wanted our churches to grow. I ignored that advice.

We take on what is important and relevant. Shortly after I moved to Gainesville, the U.S. Supreme court reinstated the death penalty in America, and I found myself standing at the vigil opposing John Spink's execution. Susan Cary then introduced me to Ray Meeks, and he joined this church from death row. I preached about how I formed my opposition to the death penalty, but I never insisted that you should all agree with me.

In the early 1980's, the sanctuary movement asked churches to shelter illegal Central American immigrants who had been denied political asylum in the United States but whom human rights groups deemed to be in danger of their lives.

Our social justice/ peacemakers group at that time asked that this congregation sponsor a Salvadoran family as part of the sanctuary movement. We struggled with this challenge, and there were significant divisions of opinion

because what we were asking was illegal. We ultimately came to a compromise whereby the Quaker Friends Meeting actually housed the family, but we co-sponsored them, supporting them financially and with lots of care and concern. We did this at the time we were also building our church school wing and taking out a new mortgage on our building.

In 1991 we spent a year exploring what it would mean to become an Open and Affirming church, welcoming all people to all parts of church life and leadership regardless of their sexual orientation. At the same time we were building this sanctuary and office wing. In 1992 we not only dedicated this sanctuary, we also voted to become an Open and Affirming Church. Again conventional wisdom said not to take on what was then an even more controversial issue than it is now, just when you built a new church and took on a significant new financial responsibility.

We lost 60 members out of a church of 400 that year, but we immediately gained that membership back. It was the right thing to do, and we did not and will not ever steer away from it. I was proud of this church.

Fifth, while we take on tough issues, we also have great fun here. The church school children have relived the Exodus, Noah's ark, and escaped slavery in the Underground Railroad. In worship ministers fly as angels and pop out of hidden places as Christmas elves. We have turned the chairs every which way, including that way in this sanctuary. We have humor Sunday (coming up/ send me jokes) and fire eating. Music here is mystical, majestic, righteous and raucous. Our youth not only give up their spring breaks to rebuild broken houses, they are also surprised with magical mystery trips. Our retreats feel like a combination of church camp, a commune, and a cruise. Just look at this week's schedule of adult small groups in the back of the bulletin to get a sense of the heavenly host of opportunities for joy and spirit unleashed here.

And all of this is encapsulated in the motto of this church that began about the time I arrived here, "It's not like this every Sunday." And we say that every Sunday.

Sixth, we have constantly added ministerial leadership. Sandy began working in this church running our youth program one day a week the year after we arrived. This church was able to increase her time and responsibilities little by little, year after year, and she in turn was able to give this church exactly what it needed. Most churches have to wait until they can make a jump from one to two full time ministers, and that's what gets them stuck. We could do it like the tortoise, one step at a time.

Look at our evolution to four ministers, now each preaching one Sunday a month. There's not a pompous prima donna in the bunch.

With Sandy we have long had strong female leadership in this church. That is essential.

There are only 246 ministers in the whole United Church of Christ who are under 40, and in Andy and Vince, we have two of the best. Their youthful vision and energy have kept this church from aging with Sandy and me.

Most important of all, we ministers all get along great and know how to share openly with one another.

Seventh, we have developed here an open and inclusive spirituality that welcomes everyone without watering down the strength of our individual beliefs and questions. I think most people come to this church initially because of UCG's reputation as an activist, socially relevant church. But we stay here because of the rich spiritual life and connection we find here in all its diversity.

The theologian Paul Tillich said that grace is accepting that you are accepted as you are. You don't have to do anything. You don't have to renounce your past. You simply need to accept that you are accepted by God, however known, and each other. From acceptance all manner of new life flows.

This is what holds us together. We accept that we are accepted as we are, whether we're quite traditional in our faith, whether we travel non-Judeo Christian spiritual paths, whether we're searching cutting edge theology, or whether we best describe ourselves as questioning, seeking, agnostics or atheists. In all of this we accept and are accepted.

We are a salad not a stew. We retain our individual flavors as we're tossed together in this salad, and in so doing we believe we are spiritually enhanced and enriched. We do not reduce our faith to the least common denominator that offends no one.

Eighth, consistent, quiet, private, generous giving enabled this church to grow. We have no lists of donors like the Center for Performing Arts, with Archangels, Angels, and God's Little Helpers. In 1974 there were 41 pledging units in this church. The average pledge was \$400, somewhere around 3-5% of the members' average income. Adjusted for inflation \$400 would be \$1,800 this year. That is exactly our average pledge this year, which is about 2.5% of the current average household income of this church, figured conservatively.

Four times in the history of this church we engaged in building fund campaigns - in 1976 to buy and renovate the current fellowship hall, which then was the sanctuary, in 1984 to build the Sunday School wing, in 1991 to buy this land and build the sanctuary, office, and room 9, and in 2003 to add the West Wing to the fellowship hall and build a Habitat for Humanity house. The first three building campaigns all took place during times that were categorized as recessions.

If you look at all the arenas of vitality that have taken this church through its tortoise like reliable growth over the years, the one arena that could stand some challenging right now is our giving. Our 2.5% of income average pledge is also the national average for giving in mainline churches. We are not average here in any way, and our giving should be more than the national average of income.

If we increased our giving by 1% of our income, the budget of this church would increase by over \$275,000. Think of the impact we could have.

Ninth, at every stage of growth we worried that we were becoming too big and would lose the essence of who we were. When we passed 100 members we feared that we could not be a true church without being able to know each other personally. When we went over 200 members we thought that going to

two services would destroy us. In 1983, we didn't think we could afford a church school wing that we had to build. When we outgrew what is now the fellowship hall as our sanctuary and built this building, we started having panic attacks that a fancy building would never feel like sacred space. Needless to say, that disorder disappeared about two and a half minutes into the first time we walked into this building.

Every time the anxiety of growth presented itself, we planned, prayed, and envisioned together. The result has been the immeasurable, unmerited grace of God which has showered itself upon us when we were simply open to receive it. We wondered how we would find the right ministers to staff our youth and adult programs, and look at how grace brought us Kristi Button, Andy Bachmann and Vince Amlin.

So number ten, hear the scripture from the prophet Isaiah as a message of God's promise when we truly open ourselves to what is good, right, just and true.

Isaiah 58: 6-12

Is not this the fast I choose:

To loose the bonds of injustice,

To undo the thongs of the yoke,

To let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry

and bring the homeless poor into our house...

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn

and your healing shall spring up quickly...

Then your light shall rise in the darkness

and your gloom be like the noonday. ..

and you shall be like a watered garden,

like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;

You shall raise up the foundations of many generations;

You shall be called the repairer of what is broken,

The restorer of streets to live in.

Those are the words of Isaiah, and that my friend turtles, young and old, is God's promise to us for continued growth as individuals and as a community of faith.

Let us pray:

I invite you to think of how you have grown in faith in the last five, ten, twenty, or thirty years, as far back as makes sense for you. Think of these moments and pray for them.

What spiritual power has stirred you?

What new causes have shaped you?

What struggles have seasoned you?

What acts of goodness and generosity have made you justifiably proud of yourself?

What people have saved your life?

How have you unexpectedly found love, given and received?

Pray for all of these gifts.
Pray for also for this church, your place in it, and its future.
Trust that your prayers are true and come true.
Amen.