

**Unitarian Universalism Today:
A Case Study and Playbook**
Reverend Christana Wille McKnight
Minister, First Parish Church in Taunton

There are few today who believe that the models we are using in the modern and postmodern Unitarian Universalist church are working well. Our attendance numbers are dropping, as they have been for years. Though we are not declining as quickly as many of our mainstream Protestant counterparts, we also do not have as far to fall to become extinct. Our religious education decline is quickly reaching unsustainable levels. We have fewer viable congregations today than we did thirty years ago, and many of the congregations we do have are struggling to adapt to a changing religious and social landscape. Perhaps most importantly, we have a spiritual and moral imperative to deconstruct the culture of white supremacy within our congregations and our denomination as a whole. Though - and perhaps all the more so because - we live in a current national culture that supports “divide and conquer,” we must intentionally build strength, diversity and hope in our congregations, and live out our theology of inclusion, connection and love.

Some believe the above assessment of a decline in church participation leads us to the undesirable conclusion that the age for religious gathering is past, and that church will never again be the thriving lifeline of community. While I understand that perspective, I do not agree with it. I believe that our theology is vital to the needs of the world, and that we are called to find ways to be an ever more relevant, community focused, multicultural, transformative religious beloved community. I believe we can become what we need to be, or take steps in that direction. This paper offers a case study of one church — the congregation I have been serving for nine years — as a replicable example that can be used in other settings to create a different kind of community.

OVERVIEW OF FIRST PARISH CHURCH IN TAUNTON

Stats: 2012

Average Adult Sunday Attendance: 9

Average Child/Youth Sunday Attendance: 2

Total Income Beyond Endowment Draw: \$5,300

Racial Demographics: 100% White

Average Age: 62

of Pledging Units: 7

Median pledge: \$1,600

Community Programs: 0

Guest-to-member conversion rate: Unknown

Stats: 2020 (pre-pandemic)

Average Adult Sunday Attendance: 56

Average Child/Youth Sunday Attendance: 26

Total Income Beyond Endowment Draw: \$160,000

Racial Demographics: 70% White, 30% BIPOC

Average Age: 44

of Pledging Units: 43

Median Pledge: \$1,200

Community Programs: Six. Chalice Thrift Shop, Church Green Farmers Market, Matthew Mission Outreach and Warming Center, Free Foot Clinic, Teen Gift Program, Forest of Light
Guest-to-member conversion rate: 35%

In 2012, I became the contract minister at the First Parish Church in Taunton. It was a marriage of convenience initially — they needed a minister and I needed a job within driving distance of my house. It was my second church re-start. My first had been at the Unitarian Church in Norton, which had two people in attendance when they hired me to revitalize their church in 2010. Through a variety of methods, we were able to grow that church to a membership list of forty-two, and attendance of over sixty people. However, the people who originally hired me deduced correctly that if they let the new members join the church, they would no longer hold all of the power and be able to make all the decisions. With that knowledge, they refused to let any of the new members join (their bylaws dictated that potential members had to be approved by the Board of Trustees) and discontinued my contract. I began in Taunton three weeks later, after a quick negotiation with their Board of Trustees, including a two-page letter of “freedoms” I would require if I was to revitalize their church. They agreed to the terms, and we got to work.

The First Parish Church in Taunton had 70 members on the books when I arrived. In actuality, the number was closer to between 12 and 15, and Sunday mornings were often in the single digits. I quickly found that most of the members listed had left the church years ago, moved away or, most notably, died. The church had been subsisting for a number of years on the interest from its endowment, which did not provide enough income to afford them a full-time minister, among other things. With my hiring, the congregation agreed to tap the principle of the endowment and treat it as a savings account. This was acknowledged to be a last ditch effort to see if we could make the church live, both in spirit and in functionality. At the time of my hiring, the church had no street address, had several rooms in the building that had been locked off for literally years, and was receiving threatening notices from the IRS that the building was going to be put up for auction because the church owed two separate payroll tax bills, one for \$248 and one for \$118.

First Parish Church in Taunton is in the heart of an old mill city that, while it “used to be” a destination, today struggles to thrive. The vacancy rate in downtown, where the church is

located, ranges between 30% and 40%. Buildings are often abandoned or change hands quickly after new businesses set up shop and then find they cannot turn a profit. The closest neighbor to the church is “old City Hall” which, after being set on fire by an arsonist in 2011, remained vacant and unrepaired by the city until 2020. The parking lot we use across the street belongs to a building that was abandoned some twenty years ago; it has a pothole in the middle large enough that when it rains in the springtime, ducks come and live in it. My children have named the pothole “Ducky Pond.” Between 60% and 70% of the children in the Taunton school district are on the free or reduced lunch program, and the majority of the clergy serving in the city work on a part-time basis. The city is racially diverse, with approximately 30% of the city identifying as people of color; there are 134 languages spoken at Taunton High.

This UU church re-start was not supposed to work. When I began in Taunton, there was almost no one I knew who thought that going there was a good idea, or that we would be able to grow the church to be sustainable, in terms of either membership or finances. My colleagues, by-and-large, reprimanded me for agreeing to be the contract minister in Taunton (I was called after a year and a half with the church) and warned me that this was not a place where Unitarian Universalism could thrive. I feel it is important to name both the racism and classism that undergird these assumptions, and the idea that Unitarian Universalism is predisposed to thrive only in wealthy, white communities, and cannot survive in diverse, blue-collar communities.

If this was not supposed to work, why did it? Our congregation is not one that “leads the pack” in numbers or in money. But it is one that rose from death’s door nine years ago to become a strong, diverse, financially solvent, relevant community today. Many tell me that it is because of my leadership, and that these kinds of results are not replicable. I am writing this paper because I disagree with that hypothesis. I am a good minister and a strong leader. But this transformation was possible because I was following a different playbook than the ones I received in seminary or through my fellowshiping process, not because I’m one of the only people who can engender this kind of transformation.

I believe that what we have done in Taunton is largely teachable and replicable, and that we as a denomination have the capacity to support this kind of transformation in our churches throughout the country. While this is just a small sampling of some of the strategies we employed in Taunton, I offer them today in hopes that they will be useful for other churches and/or denominational bodies to use as a jumping off point in creating change, growth and a new level of diverse, faithful commitment within Unitarian Universalism.

1. *Live Invitational Culture.* I changed our vocabulary and actions from “attractional” to “invitational.” Our job is not to attract people to our churches, leaving growth and transformation up to chance, but rather to invite them in. To that end, I attended a wide variety of community gatherings on a regular basis to share about our church and invite

those gathered to be part of our community. Some of the groups I attended are Business Network International groups, Rotary, Kiwanis, Meetups, Chamber of Commerce Monthly Drink and Networking, Odd Fellows, parents' groups, library groups and community celebrations. As a parent of school-aged children, I networked up and down the bleachers at swim meets and hockey practice, visiting with other parents, getting to know them and offering my card to those who were interested, along with information about the church. I do not join any of these groups but am a "frequent guest" and often a presenter. The goal is to be a member of the community and an ambassador from our church community to share what we have to offer and make people more aware of our congregation. I make it a practice to attend at least one networking event each month, preferably to a group I have not worked with extensively before. Networking outside the church community accounts for between 10% and 20% of my time each month.

2. *Use Accessible Language.* Early on, I learned that the most effective communicators in the U.S. today work with, at the highest, an eighth grade vocabulary. There are some wonderful historical examples of this, including Franklin Delano Roosevelt's explanation of the Lend-Lease Act with Great Britain in 1940, (which I would strongly recommend looking up if you are not familiar with the way in which it was presented to the nation.) I do not "dumb down" my sermons or concepts, but work carefully to use language that is accessible to everyone in our congregation, which includes people with doctoral degrees and people who can't read. I am also extremely careful to avoid "insider speak." I assume, in every situation, that there are people who are with us for the first time. This is an unbending rule.

3. *Put Words into Action.* In lower income communities, we often do not have the luxury of conversation without action. Abraham Maslow, now a well-know scholar, presented in his 1943 paper a hierarchy of needs, beginning with physiological and safety needs and ending with self-actualization. In our community, there are many people who are living in the land of working to meet their needs on levels one and two (physiological and safety needs); they do not have the luxury of spending a lot of time or energy on self-actualization. Furthermore, those who do have their basic needs met are invested in our community, and in making sure that others have the same security. As so many have realized anew during the pandemic, talk is cheap and actions speak louder than words. It has been essential for us to walk the walk in Taunton about being there for our neighbors, helping out in times of need, truly living our faith. For examples of this, please see "Community Programs" in the "Overview: Stats" section.

4. *Create an Intentionally Welcoming Community.* One of the greatest gifts that I inherited at First Parish Church in Taunton is a moment during Sunday morning worship called the “Hands of Fellowship.” It is a moment in the service in which everyone present is invited to stand up, walk around a bit, greet their friends, and most importantly, go talk with someone they don’t know. This is how we began to build a culture of intentionally welcoming — I insisted from the pulpit that people get up out of their seats and greet people they had never met before. Additionally, I asked specific individuals to make sure that they greeted new people during the Hands of Fellowship, and placed this ritual early in the service, so that people feel warmly welcomed within the first few minutes of joining worship. I’ve been told by people who have joined our church that this is a very effective strategy, and that is reflected in our guest-to-member conversion rate. This welcome is also deeply rooted in our invitational culture; please see “Overview: Stats” section.

5. *Reflect the Wider Community and Context.* Churches are only relevant to their wider communities if they are, in fact, reflective of their wider communities. We need to reflect the community and its context in every part of what we do. That includes how we prioritize our resources, where we place our attention and how we focus our ministry. Now, more than ever in a largely virtual world, people have choices about attending worship on a screen. While offering high-quality worship, accessible through the web, is a gift and an important ministry, readily available online worship makes it all the more necessary for brick and mortar churches to play a vital role in specific, local communities. To stay grounded in our community, every six months or so I imagine the church has closed, and create a list of how various community stakeholders would be impacted without our congregation.

6. *Understand that Every Person Who Comes to Church Will Change It.* I have lost track of the number of times colleagues have said to me, “Now you have to teach them how to be UU.” I do not teach “them.” We teach each other. Our congregations are not stagnant bodies. Rather, they are moving, living communities that change and grow and develop as each new person enters into community. As long as we are true to our theology, there is extraordinary freedom to develop and change culturally within our congregations. Furthermore, I believe we have a theological responsibility to actively engage in the process of growth and development. As we welcome change and growth, our congregations will become more authentically embedded in the wider communities they serve.

7. *Know and Understand the Wider Community's History, Culture, Demographics and Needs Deeply.* We are all born out of our history, individually and institutionally. In order for UU churches to be relevant to and transformative in their communities, they must be grounded in the community's history and culture. One of the best things I did when I first began in Taunton was to get to know the community. I began by reading the church archives from the last 50 years and interviewing all the living ministers who had served the church. Once I had a handle on church history, I began reading local history books, and spent considerable time getting to know the community. I walked and drove around the city. I interviewed, among others, school guidance counselors, local business people, clergy in other churches, homeless people living on the city green and the mayor, to get a sense of what the realities were in Taunton — what people were proud of, what they struggled with, what mattered to them. Patterns emerged from all those interviews, which, along with the history I had learned, guided me in determining which needs of the community the church could effectively address. Additionally, these interviews and observations helped me understand more deeply the connection between church and community identity.

8. *Create an Infrastructure that Supports Cultural Change.* I believe in multigenerational community, so when I began at First Parish I created a space for children in every room. We also created a policy that childcare would be provided at all church events. In order to create a culture of transparency, I required as a condition of my hiring that I would have access to any and all church records and documents, and that church members would be able to request access to documents and records. I also requested and was given, as part of my pre-hire negotiations, chief of staff responsibilities and authority. Another negotiation point included dispensing with the hymnals in favor of using any music that supported the worship theme, and using an electric drum kit in worship. These infrastructure changes, initiated at the beginning of my tenure, helped define the culture of the church going forward.

9. *Create Multicultural Worship Experiences.* One of the resources I returned to often was Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis' book, *The Power of Stories: A Guide for Leading Multiracial and Multicultural Congregations*. While the specifics of her approach are beyond the scope of this paper, I want to note the relevance and importance of her teachings, and others like her, to the UU church experience. By reflecting the history and truth within our community through diverse stories, music and a wide variety of modalities, First Parish became increasingly, comfortably and naturally welcoming to people from a wide variety of contexts and cultures. Creating multicultural worship experiences has to be done, of

course, in direct communication and relationship with people who have different stories, and with awareness to avoid cultural appropriation.

10. *Talk About Racism, Classism and the Injustices in the World in Meaningful Ways and Work to End These Unjust Constructs.* No matter the context of an individual congregation, conversations about race, class and justice are important and necessary to have in any UU congregation.. Different congregations will have different ways of having these conversations, and having them in a way that is culturally relevant is essential. Furthermore, as UUs we have a spiritual and moral imperative to not just talk about these issues but to specifically use our power in whatever way we can to help end these constructs within our world and support those who are currently being impacted by them. One of the ways First Parish supported these efforts, for example, was by hosting a protest after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. The two women, not from our congregation, who were organizing the protest had been denied a permit from the city to gather on public property, so we offered up our grounds as an alternative protest site. The police, mayor, and local businesses were furious with us and did everything in their power to stop us from hosting, including threatening both me and the church. They called in other area police the day of the protest to surround the church and the city, as well as the State Police, military tanks and the National Guard. Because of our longtime commitment to racial justice and ongoing conversations about racism, no one in the congregation hesitated for a moment in the face of the threats, but steadfastly held onto our religious belief that this was what our faith required of us. We hosted and co-organized a non-violent protest with over 1000 people in attendance and heard hundreds say afterwards, “For the first time in years, I’m proud to be from Taunton.”

11. *Understand That Unitarian Universalism is a Theology, Not Culture.* My belief is that our theology is not bound by class or color. Our theology of universal love for all and our shared values of respect, radical welcome, compassion and hope are relevant for all people. It is important to note here an important distinction, which is that theology and culture are not the same thing. We cannot mistake UU theology, such as universal love for all, for UU culture (“We have a lot of committees!”) or stereotypes (“We all buy fair-trade coffee”). We must forget every “UU joke” ever told and not make the mistake of thinking that in order for a church to be “really UU” it has to reflect historical UU culture. Our theology is what defines us as a religion, and it is that theology of love, hope and compassion that the world desperately needs now. It is our job as people of faith to stand up and provide for this theological need, address the cultural differences that have been standing in our way, and answer the call before us.

This document is not an attempt to be comprehensive, as it is short and reflects only one case study. However, in conversations with my colleagues and friends over the years, it seems clear that the strategies and results of First Parish are not widespread within Unitarian Universalism. I believe we are taking good steps forward as a denomination, including the Widening the Circle of Concern report and the recently passed adaptations to the UUMA Guidelines. We can grow and change in new and liberating ways. I hope that this reflection on my experience at First Parish is a useful contribution to the discussion, and I look forward to moving forward together as a faith.

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