

# Seeing Double – July 6, 2011

## Seeing Double

by David Green

The other day I was thinking about the first time I was asked to speak here at the Fellowship. It wasn't just the first time I spoke here, it was the first time I'd even set foot inside the building.

It was about four-and-a-half years ago, and while I don't remember every detail, my topic was the Christmas story, and before I spoke, I was introduced with something of a disclaimer that I thought was hilarious.

Essentially, I was being warned that perhaps not everyone was thrilled to have an ordained Christian minister speak to them, and the members of the congregation were told to be on their best behavior; that even though I might say some things that some people wouldn't agree with, to be polite anyway.

So I did, and the other rather remarkable thing was that when I'd finished speaking, a guy on the front row shouted out, "Amen!"

I appreciated that affirmation, and it was one of the many things that impressed me about this Fellowship, and that made me want to return.

I was already familiar with Unitarian Universalism, had visited the UU church in Austin and had become friends with one of their ministers, and my impression was that UUs were highly intellectual, very oriented toward social justice issues, and diverse as far as where individual members might be in their spiritual beliefs.

And that really intrigued me, for a couple of reasons: first, for a long time, even though I was a minister who'd served Christian churches my whole career, my own beliefs had evolved. I became a Christian Universalist, and for a lot of orthodox Christians, Universalism is viewed as a certain stinky substance that's stuck to the bottom of your shoe.

Secondly, among the folks in the churches I served, and in just getting to know people in general, I'd witnessed a growing desire—a real hunger – to find and belong to a community of people who were more open and accepting of different ways of thinking about and practicing their faith.

This Fellowship truly stirred my imagination because I recognized that for me personally, and for a potentially large number of people, what was going on here was a very good thing. Almost a hidden treasure that not nearly enough people knew existed.

I thought, this place—this group of people—might be where I belong, and where I might even be able to play some kind of role in spreading the good news of what Unitarian Universalism is all about. Although at the time I honestly had no idea it would ever lead to this.

We've come a long way in four-and-a-half years.

Although change is a constant reality, when it comes to institutions like this one, even when we're aware that change is inevitable, we all have moments—myself included—when we pause and say, "Wow. That's going to be different. I

need to think about this for a while and see if I'm okay with it. Do we really need to be making thus-and-such change? What's behind this? How's it going to affect me personally and all of us together?"

Well, I can tell you that there's probably no more significant change that any religious group can make, than to change what they do when they gather for what I call "corporate worship."

Now, that's just a technical term, meaning the moment in time—usually once a week – when you have a ritualized gathering of most of the members of a church; the corpus, or the body, comes together regularly at one time in one place to do one thing. For many, it's the only time, or the primary time when they're here.

That's why it's called corporate. And when I use the word, "worship," I know that not everyone thinks of this as a worship service. Strictly speaking, you might not be "worshipping" anything or anyone at all. So when I use that word, please understand that I think of it in a way that I've described before.

Our modern use of the word "worship" derives from an Old English term, "worth-scape," that means to recognize or to give thanks for something of great worth.

In other words, being together, celebrating our community, honoring our diversity, learning and sharing, affirming our principles, and being with people we genuinely love and care for is worthy of our time and attention and best effort.

But whether you call what we do on Sunday mornings worship, or a service, or a program, the fact is, we have had more and more people showing up.

On any given Sunday, we'll average somewhere around 84 people, and on some Sundays—pretty much anytime James Doores speaks as Mark Twain—we'll often have well over 100 folks attend.

On the one hand, that's something to be thankful for, but on the other hand, it presents us with a bit of a problem.

Before I moved to Amarillo, I was the pastor of a church in St. Joseph, Missouri, just north of Kansas City. First Christian Church was built in downtown St. Joseph in the late 1890s, and it's a beautiful neo-classical structure that I always thought strongly resembled a bank. Designed to look solid and respectable, and a safe place to put your money, I guess.

But what really takes your breath away when you walk into the place is the sanctuary. There's a soaring domed ceiling with intricate molding and carved woodwork all around, and the room is in a large half-circle with a big wrap-around balcony, and on the main floor, long, curved, custom made pews. It has one of the largest and most magnificent pipe organs in the whole country. That thing's so loud it literally shakes the entire building.

Once I was looking through some historical documents about the church, and I was surprised to read that when it was constructed, the seating capacity of the sanctuary was listed at 1,200 people. The thing was, even though over the years some minor alterations had been made, the size of the sanctuary really had not changed much. And yet, when I was there, we were listing the seating capacity at around 500 people.

I thought, what in the world happened to those missing 700 people? Were the original builders overstating things when they listed 1,200, or were people smaller back at the turn of the last century, or what?

Part of the mystery was solved when I came across some old photographs that were taken during worship services in the 1920s. It was impossible to count all the people in the pews, but what was striking was the proximity of the people sitting next to each other. They were all shoulder-to-shoulder—or cheek-to-cheek—and some were practically sitting on their neighbor's lap.

So I did some research. I called some people who manufacture church pews and learned that as the 20th Century progressed, the number of folks who would fit on a given length of pew decreased rather dramatically. By almost half. At one time, you could fit an average person into about 18 inches of pew space. But now, that had increased to well over 30 inches.

And it wasn't because people were smaller back then—although they were—it mostly had to do with the growing psychological need and social expectation for more personal space. Even members of the same family don't necessarily like to be touching each other when they sit together. And there's a direct correlation between how well you know somebody and the empty space that's between you. You're likely to sit a lot closer to your best friend than you sit by a total stranger.

Socially—and this operates on a subconscious level that's very powerful—we tend to feel uncomfortable if we perceive that we're crowded.

In practical terms for us, that means that when someone walks into this room that's 80 or 90 percent full, at some level, it's quite likely to make them feel uncomfortable.

Everyone they meet might be friendlier than a Mormon missionary, but on a very basic level, the lack of personal space can make them feel quite cooped-up.

That's especially true if you're a first-time guest, but even if you're a long-time member, it can evoke the feeling of, "Hey, where did all these people come from, and why are they in my seat?"

There's been plenty of research on the hows and whys of congregational growth, and while they might differ on some things, the one constant discovery is that when a church reaches 75 to 80 percent of its seating capacity, it stops growing, and in some cases, it even shrinks a little.

That might seem counter-intuitive. After all, if the place is that full, then it must mean that things are going well, and sends the signal that it's worth our time and energy to be here.

While that's true, on the other hand, the numbers don't lie. In the past year or so, after our average attendance reached about 80 percent of our capacity, the average attendance has leveled out, just like all the research tells us.

It's a wonderful problem to be faced with, but it is a problem if we want to continue growing.

And that question itself may be up in the air for some of you: how much do we really want to grow? How comfortable am I with the increase in people and all the other changes around here that have resulted from that? Where's the old Fellowship I used to know?

I'm honestly not sure I have a definite answer to that. All I know is that we are changing, that we are growing, and the evidence strongly points in the direction that we'll continue on that path if we allow it and embrace it.

A few years ago, after a lot of thoughtful conversation and study, this congregation set a goal of having an active membership of 200 people by 2012. That was ambitious, and clearly, in the hearts and minds of those of you who came up with that vision, it was achievable.

I not only think it's achievable, but with the momentum we have, we'll be able to surpass that goal, and maybe need to get started on setting some new goals.

But if there's any one thing that might keep us from realizing that vision, it's simply that we're running out of space. And not just for our Sunday services, either.

Our children's and youth religious education rooms are far too small, and we're going to need to address that issue soon as well, because the same reality that affects attendance at our Sunday service also applies to our programs for children and youth: they will simply stop growing if we don't have more space.

Now, as far as our service goes, there are really two alternatives: the first is to meet in a larger space. And unless we either meet outside under a big tent, or build a new building, or move to a larger one, this is the space we have to work with.

The second alternative is to simply offer—an alternative: another time, another service, with the goal of reducing the pressure—at least for the time being—on the number of folks who attend this service.

Our board is already on board with this. So is our program committee. And so are quite a few people—key people—who are involved in everything that surrounds and supports a service. Primarily, who'll be in charge of making the coffee?

The plan is this: starting on Sunday, September 11, we will have a service at 9 AM. That service will be followed by our Adult Religious Education at 10 AM, and then, we'll have a service again at 11.

The 9 o'clock service will be—as much as possible—identical to the 11 o'clock service.

A lot of churches create a second service in a distinctly different style or format as a way of perhaps reaching out to a different demographic. Or let's say you prefer a service where there's only classical music played and it's more serene and reflective, while a second service is more laid-back and the music is louder. Different strokes for different folks.

That's not a bad idea if you're in the situation of figuring out how to grow by offering an alternative style that might attract new people.

But we're not in that situation. We're in a situation most churches would kill to be in. We're growing quite happily with a service format that might not perfectly suit every member, but the evidence suggests that it works for most members.

So rather than create a whole new thing, we're going to double the thing we have. The only difference will be that you have the option of coming at 9 o'clock, or at 11 o'clock. The same essential service at two different times.

That being said, remember that change is a constant. Especially around here, it seems. We may still need to tweak things now and again in one or both services. The 9 o'clock service will have to run like clockwork if we're going to be done in time for Adult RE.

But we'll make it work. And all of this is wonderful news.

Our hope is that roughly 20 or more of the folks who now attend this service at 11 o'clock will give the 9 o'clock service a try. That'll help alleviate that 80 percent threshold we're now averaging.

We also expect that for many new folks as well as long-time members, 9 o'clock will just be a more attractive timeframe to attend a service. You can go earlier and then get on with the rest of your Sunday.

One fear that inevitably gets voiced whenever a church creates a second service is that some might feel disconnected from their friends whom they've always seen and been able to visit with at the one service.

And what about hearing all the joys and concerns? If you come at 11, will you know what was shared at the 9 o'clock service, and vice-versa?

We'll, there's no denying that at least in terms of always seeing the same people you're used to seeing on Sundays, that might very well change. But that's why we have things like chalice groups and the men's and women's fellowship groups, and the book study group, and the Buddhist and the Christian groups. There's ample opportunity to stay connected.

And whenever a joy or a concern is shared in one service, I guarantee it'll be repeated at the very next service. You'll still know what's going on.

See? I have an answer for everything!

Not really. I don't pretend to know it all. None of us do. We're simply taking what we believe is the next natural step in our evolution and growth as a Fellowship.

And I'm willing to try and do whatever is possible for this Fellowship to grow. I'm committed to that, and I'm thankful to be in this covenant relationship with you.

I got my first taste of that commitment—the feeling that what goes on here is so good that I want the world to know—that day when I – a Christian minister – was first invited to step inside this special place to speak—and someone shouted “Amen!”

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