

Churchgoers from elsewhere: Surveys: 'UUism' unique

by [John Dart](#) in the [December 5, 2001](#) issue

Before the American Unitarian Association merged with the Universalist Church of America in 1961, the former group ran an ad campaign suggesting, "I was a Unitarian all along and never knew it." The Unitarian Universalist Association could revive such a slogan today in view of recent surveys. Two polls indicate that only 10 percent of its members were born and raised in UU traditions.

Both a new, regional survey by an Ohio University scholar and a nationwide poll conducted in 1997 by the association determined that UUs found a philosophical-ethical home in the socially liberal, creedless, gender-inclusive denomination after rejecting the teachings and practices of their previous religious traditions.

"More so than for any other religious tradition, a person can become UU because of what he already believes rather than believing what he does because of becoming a UU," said James Casebolt, coauthor of two papers on the regional survey read at the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion annual meeting in October. Casebolt surveyed UUA congregations in Ohio, West Virginia and western Pennsylvania.

Reasons given by Unitarian Universalists there for leaving other churches were along the line of "couldn't believe dogma, but wanted community" (ex-Methodist), "could not accept Jesus myth" (nominal Episcopalian), "my wife and I could not reconcile the Christian theology with a rational approach to life" (nominal Presbyterian). The second-most common theme was the perception that one's original tradition was restrictive and exclusivistic, said Casebolt and student researcher Tiffany Niekro.

There have been enough seekers aligning with the now-1,000-plus congregations and fellowships to help the Boston-based UUA to post 19 consecutive years of growth. Adult contributing members number 156,968, said John Hurley, communications director.

However, 629,000 U.S. adults—four times as many as UUA members on church rolls—think of themselves as Unitarian Universalists, according to directors of a third poll, the Religious Identification Survey 2001. That estimate was extrapolated from the random survey of 50,000 households released in October by City University of New York. CUNY's previous poll in 1990 came up with 502,000 adults calling themselves Unitarian Universalists—many more than those active in congregations.

"We have a chuckle over those figures," said Hurley. The huge gap between actual members and self-identified members was attributed by Hurley partly to the individualistic legacy of New England transcendentalism. "They may consider themselves UUs but do not see that it is necessary to belong," Hurley said.

Former UUA president John Buehrens, who completed eight years in office this year, pointed to some trends that contribute to the drifting away of members as well as to the replenishment of congregations. "We have a very high rate of mobility – some 15 percent of UUs change their address each year," Buehrens said in an e-mail interview. "Our young people also tend to 'marry out,'" he said. "They often are more adaptable about the religious nurture of children than their more religiously conservative spouses." (Indeed, the 1997 UUA survey and Casebolt's poll also found that current members rarely cited "religious education for children" as a reason they joined a UU congregation.)

Nevertheless, a concerted effort to appeal to high school youths and young adults has apparently paid off. "During the past decade the number of high school youth in our congregations increased fivefold, and the number of young adults increased sixfold," said Buehrens, who this fall is a visiting professor at the UUA's Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, the number of high school youths increased and the UUA transformed "a large number of lay-led fellowships into congregations with professional ministry," Buehrens said. From 1993 to 1997, congregations sponsoring campus groups went from 19 to 135, and the growth has continued, he said.

Buehrens was skeptical about surveys showing only 10 percent of members being born-and-bred UUs. Among young adults, he said, roughly one-third were "raised UU." And the percentage of New England church members whose parents were in Unitarian or Universalist congregations would be much higher than 10 percent, most observers say.

Nevertheless, the denomination-run survey in 1997, to which 8,100 members responded, tallied 9.9 percent who said they were “lifelong members” in answering one question and, to another question on what influenced them to join the UUA, 10.4 percent said, “I was born into UUism.”

So, just what is “UUism,” the denomination’s unusual umbrella term? Though critics usually look upon the UUA as a union of unbelief and uncertainty, the church body’s Web site upholds a belief that “personal experience, conscience and reason should be the final authorities in religion.” Since “human understanding of life and death, the world and its mysteries, is never final,” the association endorses the “free search for truth,” or more precisely, “unfolding truths” over time. Underlying its actions is the belief “that ethical living is the supreme witness of religion.”

Whereas “human reason and knowledge” was called very important by 96 percent of UU congregational leaders who took part in the multi- denominational Faith Communities Today (FACT) survey released early this year, the Bible was termed only “somewhat important” by 50 percent and had little or no importance to 48 percent as a source for worship and teaching. God’s presence, at best, was sensed significantly by only 25 percent in church and somewhat by another 36 percent.

As for a preferred theological label, among respondents in the FACT survey and in two other polls previously cited, “humanist” always got the most votes. The UUA’s in-house survey four years ago asked church members to chose only one label (though some chose more). The top choices were humanist (46 percent), earth/nature centered (19 percent), theist (13 percent), Christian (9.5 percent), with mystic, Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu and Muslim in ever-smaller percentages. Another 13 percent picked “other.”

The FACT survey and Casebolt’s Ohio-based survey asked respondents to pick as many self-descriptions as they wanted. In the FACT survey, which had seven categories, humanist (91 percent), earth-centered, theist and Christian were the top four in the same order as the 1997 survey, but Buddhist and Jewish were also picked by a quarter of the respondents.

Casebolt offered 20 labels, including pagan, atheist and agnostic in his Midwestern survey. Humanist was again a clear choice (54 percent), but agnostic (33 percent) beat out earth-centered (31 percent). Atheist was picked by 18 percent and Buddhist by 16.5 percent. Pagan and Christian tied at 13.1 percent. “That the typical

respondent felt the need to circle three or four terms to describe his or her theological views” demonstrated the complexity of many UUs’ outlook, Casebolt said.

Unitarian Universalists are not oblivious to the ironic humor of their association. One question posed in the internal UUA survey in 1997 was: “What tickles your spiritual funny bone?” Writers of the questionnaire offered several possibilities gleaned from their experience. The top choice (31 percent) was: “That UUs claim to be seekers at the same time we act like we have the answers.”