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Singing in the Dark

Faith is a bird that feels dawn breaking and sings while it is still dark. - Rabindranath Tagore

Among the many ways that congregations grow, the one most closely associated with faith development is Maturational Growth, or growing the faith. It can also be thought of as *growing from the inside out*, for a congregation that does not have a clear sense of its Unitarian Universalist identity will have a difficult time growing in other areas.

My contention is that in order to have a positive vision for growth, and in order to meet any challenge to the realization of that vision, we need to have faith. Now, by faith, I am not referring to blind faith; to a belief without true understanding, perception, or discrimination; or to an unconscious, almost mechanical allegiance to something in the face of compelling change or contrary evidence. Rather, by faith, I mean a deepening of our Unitarian Universalist beliefs and principles; a strengthening of our belief in and commitment to each other; and a way of living that enables us to gain strength through conflict and adversity, to take extraordinary risks and to never lose confidence in who we are as a congregation and in what we can become.

The promotion of faith development aids in the growing of our congregations in many ways. By helping members of a congregation to better understand their Unitarian Universalist identity, we support numerical growth as congregants go out into the world and speak with passion and clarity about Unitarian Universalism. By supporting each member's journey in living out their UU faith both within the walls of the congregation and in the wider world, we increase both organic and incarnational growth in

the development of more leaders, the promotion of greater volunteerism, and the enhancement of more significant social justice and social action initiatives. And by better assisting members of our congregations to live in covenant with each other, we help to manage growth, embrace change, and ensure open communication, all of which are factors associated with growth.

So how do we promote greater faith development in our congregations? We start with leaders who are clear on what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist and are able to articulate it; We encourage members of the congregation to develop their own UU identity through workshops, worship and involvement in congregational life that is clearly connected to Unitarian Universalist principles and beliefs; and we develop behavioral covenants with each other that aid everyone in living out their UU identity and principles.

With reference to this third point, developing behavioral covenants, author Gil Rendle refers to the concept of *obedience to the unenforceable*: "that area of our lives of faith in which we submit to certain ways of living because we hold membership in a faith community that rests on beliefs and values that prescribe such behaviors." It is our faith in our principles and in doing the right thing that governs our adherence to the covenants we make. We agree to be obedient to the unenforceable because we have faith in each other and because it is the right thing to do. For more ideas and inspiration on behavioral covenants, I recommend [Behavioral Covenants in Congregations](#) by Gilbert R. Rendle, 1999, The Alban Institute.

Believing in each other, committing to each other, making promises to one another. These are the ways in which congregations grow. How do I know? You just have to have faith.

With Respect,

Mark Bernstein