

“Ako may dakong kabahin sa pagpalambo sa kongregasyon”
(I am an integral part for congregational growth)
I Corinthians 12: 12-20

Rev. Fredric J. Muir
Annapolis, Maryland, USA

The congregation I serve has a class for newcomers several times a year – it’s a way for them to learn about Unitarian Universalism and to learn about the church. We begin the class with an opportunity for people to tell their story – the religious and spiritual story or journey of how they came to the church, which usually includes telling us about the faith of their childhood and family and telling us about the several stops they have made between then and now. Sometimes these stories can be quite elaborate and long depending on how committed a person was to finding a church that they would call their religious home and how many faith communities they joined along their way. The stories newcomers tell are wonderful to hear and quite different from each other. But what they hold in common is each one tells about what they need; their story is about individual needs and in order to meet their needs they have had to go from church to church searching for that something they couldn’t find elsewhere. And so it is they come to see us, wanting to know what the church and congregation is going to give and provide for them. The kinds of things they want include: education, counseling, spiritual depth, a safe place to explore religion, new friends (and maybe even a loving partner), and an outlet for their passion for social justice. And there’s usually much more. Though I can’t imagine anyone of these newcomers ever saying it like this, they might as well be asking: “If I come to your church, what’s in it for me?” Or, “If I become a Unitarian Universalist, what will you do for me?”

These are legitimate and important questions to ask and the answers are equally as important (I would love to hear from you how you would answer – and maybe you have already had newcomers ask these questions). Depending on what a newcomer hears could lead to their becoming Unitarian Universalist. But – and I’ve seen this happen so many times – they don’t stay a Unitarian Universalist very long unless something changes, a change that results in calling **your** church **their** church and Unitarian Universalism **their** way of faith. There must be a shift or transition or move from “me” to “us,” which is to say: While a person might come – and often does – with specific needs to be met and questions to be answered, if these

remain the only reasons they stay with your congregation, then the likelihood is that they won't be active for very long, but they will leave (and they might even tell others that your congregation doesn't meet the needs of members). Everything I'm describing could be true for any congregation anywhere. What I'm talking about is church member identity: How strongly does a member (new or old) identify with your congregation? How strongly do you identify as a Unitarian Universalist? One easy way to hear this is to listen to people talk about their church, especially when the talk is about something difficult or controversial. Does the member talking use words that put distance between them and the congregation, as if to suggest that they are not a member of the church (when really they are)? Does the person who is talking use divisive "they" language (as in, "they did this," or "they decided that" or "if they want")? Or does the member use inclusive "we" language (as in, "we must decide if ..." or "we need to examine closely" or "we will do what is best for all")? I would suggest that the more "they" language you hear, the more a member is really concerned about their own needs (or the needs of a small group of like-minded people) and not concerned about the needs of the congregation.

The tension between individual needs and congregational needs is not only wide-spread, but it is very old – in fact, it is ancient. Specifically for us at this Assembly, we are looking at a tension-filled issue that is approximately 1,959 years old! That's about the age of the letter from the Apostle Paul to the church in Corinth. Let me tell you a little about the Corinthian church because it will help us understand better what Paul is advising them and it will help us set the agenda for the conversation we are going to have over the next several days.

The biblical city of Corinth (in Greece, but part of the Roman Empire) reminds me, in terms of its diversity, of Dumaguete. The Corinth that Paul was writing to was a thriving metropolis – it was a busy commercial and religious center because of its location: a port, at the intersection of trade routes, close to Athens. All of these helped to draw a variety of people and shaped different interests. Archeological digs reveal that there were Greek and Egyptian religious shrines and temples right along with the imperial cult of Rome.¹ There was extreme wealth in small segments of the population and great poverty among most Corinthians. You can imagine the results from such disparity: As in similar settings – and not unlike what we see around the world today – this led to exploitation and abuse of the poor.

Corinth had a reputation, deserved or not – it was known as “Sin City.” Corinth was not a place where people went for cultural experiences; it was a city where people came to have a good time, to party and let off steam. With a constant flow of people in and out, with new wealth being created and those looking to rob people of their wealth, with the rule of law always suspect, Corinth could be a hostile place not just to visitors but to those who called it home. For those who would come in from the country-side (farmers, merchants, those making deliveries), it must have felt like another world, a world with which they were not familiar; maybe it was even a frightening place.

The Corinth congregation was a reflection of the city’s population, without the extreme wealth; they were mostly members who had very little. And like the rest of Corinth, they were disagreeable, given to petty arguments; they could be a suspicious lot. Tension and questions were surfacing in at least three areas. First were the issues of congregational leadership and the responsibilities of good leadership. Roman (and Greek) society was built around a family system where the father (the man) was head of the family; and there was widespread agreement as to what this family leadership meant. But was it supposed to be the same way in a congregation? Second was the issue of honoring and praising. There was a strict and accepted ladder (hierarchy) of social protocol (custom). It was always the right thing to honor and praise those above you and show less regard for those below you (and you knew who occupied which position!). But how was this to be lived and enforced in the congregation? And third, everyone was responsible to someone higher or more powerful – not just slaves or those who were lowest on the ladder: **Everyone was under another** (even the emperor who was accountable to the gods). But you could also expect benefits from those to whom you were responsible. Some patrons were more generous than others and it showed; some had numerous patrons and were accumulating far more than others which created disparity among the poorer members. In other words, the social ladder was not always fair or just. Was such accountability to be maintained in the church or was there another, less familiar system that everyone was obliged to follow?

Understanding the cultural expectations and rules helps us – almost 2000 years later – to read between the lines in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian congregation; reading the subtext of Paul’s letter informs us that there were several big challenges that the church faced, many of them were explosive issues, and both members and leaders were at a loss as to what to do. It’s into this mix that Paul writes the church giving his counsel. It may not be

what they wanted or expected to hear, but Paul was in the business of creating and sustaining congregations and he had a plan for each of them. What he wrote was good advice in the first century and it's good advice in the 21st century. We will learn a lot.

So here is one part from the letter that Paul writes in I Corinthians: chapter 12, verses 12-20 (as found in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible). This section has shaped the theme for our time together in this 54th Annual Unitarian Universalist Church of the Philippines (UUCP) Convention:

12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. 14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15 If the foot were to say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many members, yet one body.

The image and metaphor of the church as a body is one of Paul's favorites. It makes for an easy and accessible way for the Corinthians, and now for us, to grasp his meaning. It's a picture often used by Paul when there is church fragmentation, disharmony and disunity. This image leads Paul to four clarifications. First, it reinforces his vision that everyone – just by being of the congregation – is of the body. For Paul, this interdependency of people with people and members with the church is what it means to be of the church (to be of the body). As a part of the body/church, every member has an important role to serve, no one's role is more important than another because each serves the body/church (for the glory of God); one body with many members. Each person's/part's worth is unique and valuable; without it the church or body could break down. Second, it goes without saying that each member of the body is going to be different – if each part wasn't

different the body couldn't function (could you imagine a body with six eyes, no hands, one leg, but two feet!). Not only is it imperative that there be different parts to make a whole, it's expected. In this way, members can and should be different from each other; it's only then that depth and breadth in the church can be honored and enjoyed by all. Third, you can begin to see where Paul is going with this line of reasoning: All members of the congregation have equal standing – which is to say, that the cultural norms of the larger society don't apply when in the congregation. Everyone's contribution and service to the church is valued. Just as there might be a tendency to overestimate a person's value, there could also be the likelihood of underestimation. In the Corinthian Church, which was composed of so many poor members, this was a radical approach to community membership. Fourth and finally, leadership is shared among the believers since no one member is more valued than another. Again, this was quite different from the way life was on the outside (outside of the church) where the leadership hierarchy was set and unchanging: Those who were considered poor would never dream of being in a position of (shared) leadership. But in the church, it was going to be different. Imagine what a revolutionary notion this was and how some must have resisted (and how those outside of the church might have been either appalled and/or intrigued).

One of the many challenges facing Paul is that each member of the church in Corinth understands the congregation from their own perspective; each person sees it with their own eyes and not necessarily with the eyes of another. I'm sure you understand what a difference this can make – as with anything – because we all bring our own experiences (our needs, education, family heritage, our political views, economic stability, religious views) to the church that we share with others (and the experiences that shape our dreams and hopes). The challenges we face are similar to the lessons learned in the story “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” which goes like this:

Once upon a time, there lived six blind men in a village. One day the villagers told them, "Hey, there is an elephant in the village today." They had no idea what an elephant is. They decided, "Even though we would not be able to see it, let us go and feel it anyway." All of them went where the elephant was. Every one of them touched the elephant.

"The elephant is a pillar," said the first man who touched his leg.

"Oh, no! It is like a rope," said the second man who touched the tail.

"Oh, no! It is like a thick branch of a tree," said the third man who touched the trunk of the elephant.

"It is like a big hand fan" said the fourth man who touched the ear of the elephant.

"It is like a huge wall," said the fifth man who touched the belly of the elephant.

"It is like a solid pipe," said the sixth man who touched the tusk of the elephant.

They began to argue about the elephant and every one of them insisted that he was right. It looked like they were getting agitated. A wise man was passing by and he saw this. He stopped and asked them, "What is the matter?" They said, "We cannot agree to what the elephant is like." Each one of them told what he thought the elephant was like. The wise man calmly explained to them, "All of you are right. The reason every one of you is telling it differently is because each one of you touched a different part of the elephant. So, actually the elephant has all those features that you said." "Oh!" everyone said. There was no more fighting. They felt happy that they were all right.

The moral of the story is that there may be some truth to what someone says. Sometimes we can see that truth and sometimes not because they may have a different perspective which we may not agree to. So, rather than arguing like the blind men, we should say, "Maybe you have your reasons." This way we don't get in arguments. In Jainism, it is explained that truth can be stated in seven different ways. [This] teaches us to be tolerant towards others. This allows us to live in harmony with people of different thinking.²

In order to build a strong, vital, healthy church, we must embrace the themes named by Paul as well as understand the lessons from this story. In summary, the message is that in order to grow the church – in spirit and in members, that is, in both depth and in breadth – it is imperative that we understand how we each identify our role and purpose and then how we are together as a group. Using Paul's image, creating a growing, healthy church is like sustaining a growing, healthy body – it means recognizing the value

of each part and then making sure all the parts are working well together. If we ignore some parts or if we cannot see them as was the case with the blind men and the elephant – then the body will not work as it could. But if we see all the parts, all the members – if each member is given value and respect – then the whole has a likely chance of growing and maintaining its health.

With Paul’s help, we see what it means to be a growing, healthy church: It means understanding the church as a body composed of different parts – you, the members – working together for a common purpose. But Paul doesn’t – at least, not in verses 12-20 – tell us how to do this, he doesn’t share exactly how the healthy congregation is to be shaped. You have to read through other epistles in order to gather this information. What makes it more challenging is that he shares different information depending on which congregation he is writing. So, with Paul’s advice in verses 12-20, let’s build on his wisdom in order to imagine a healthy church. We’ll use the word G-R-O-W-T-H as a way to direct our deeper look into Paul’s counsel.³

First, “G.” Our Unitarian Universalist faith is a **Guide** that teaches us about church health. Just the name of our faith says so much – unlike many other faith communities. There are those faith communities whose name describes the way they organize. For example, United Church of Christ, Episcopal, Presbyterian. These names all designate a means of organization, but tell us little else. Then there are some religious communities whose name reflects an action. For example Methodist, Baptist, Islam all describe actions that their followers take. There are those whose name comes from an historical religious leader like *Calvinism*, *Lutheran*, and *Buddh[a]ism*. And there are those faiths who take their name from an event like *Pentecostal* and *Adventist*. Our way of religion is one of the only (and it may be the only) whose name is theological – Unitarian Universalist describes beliefs. We are unitarian, of course, instead of trinitarian. Maybe you didn’t know this but unitarian belief is probably 3000-4000 years old (and maybe older) where trinitarian belief was created by the early church fathers 325 years after the death of Jesus. Unitarian belief promises that life experience is indivisible as is the divine. This eventually led Unitarian Christians to stress the oneness and humanness of Jesus and not his dual, divided nature (that he was both human and divine). Unitarians believe in the unity of life – that all living things are interrelated in a Web of Life (or in Paul’s language, one body) that is sacred and holy. This is a powerful guiding principle for us,

but it is not the only one. There is also Universalism which is grounded in the belief that God is love, and God as Love would never divide and condemn people; God shares that Love universally and unconditionally (for free!). Love is the nature of God; God is Love. All God can do is Love. How, then, could anyone – regardless of who they are or what they believe – be deprived of God’s Universal Love? This is impossible! These are powerful and radical guides from our faith; these are guiding beliefs that will shape and grow our congregations. This will sound really simple and basic, but it needs to be said: If you are practicing something other than the unity of life and God as unconditional Love then you are not practicing Unitarian Universalism. So, let these two beliefs always be our Guides.

When we look at Unitarian Universalist beliefs and contrast them with other faiths, we realize that ours is a faith built on or leading to generosity: We seek unity (not division) and we seek to share our good news with as many as we can: God’s love is for all and it can lift everyone. Wasn’t this the message penned by the Rev. Toribio Quimada and sung by you in “Maglipay Universalist”? “Heaven is Universalist, for everyone from rich to poor. We are not chosen from a list, to enter through the heavenly door. Lift up your hearts to God’s great grace that beckons every race to soar.”⁴ This is the Gospel of Generosity; this is the good news of Unitarian Universalism! Let me tell a story about this generosity:

Two brothers – one a bachelor, the other married – owned a farm whose good soil yielded an abundance of rice. Half the rice went to one brother and half to the other. All went well at first. Then, every now and then, the married man began to wake from his nightly sleep and think: “This isn’t fair. My brother isn’t married, he’s all alone, and he gets only half the produce of the farm. Here I am with a wife and five kids, so I have all the security I need for my old age. But who will care for my poor brother when he gets old? He needs to save much more for the future than he does at present, so his need is obviously greater than mine.” With that he would get out of bed, silently go over to this brother’s place, and hide a sack of rice among the other sacks owned by his brother.

The bachelor brother too began to wake from his nightly sleep and say to himself: “This simply isn’t fair. My brother has a wife and five kids and he gets only half the rice from the land. I have

no one except myself to support. So is it that my poor brother, whose need is obviously greater than mine, should receive exactly as much as I do?" Then he would get out of bed and hide a sack of rice among those belonging to his brother.

One night they got out of bed at the same time and ran into each other, each with a sack of rice they were taking to the other!

Many years later, after their deaths, this story was leaked out. So when the villagers wanted to build a church, they chose the spot at which the two brothers met, for they could not think of any place in the village that was holier than that one.⁵

Generosity is holiness! And our way of religion is a holy way because it is built with the bricks and logs of generosity. Ours is a faith that will not be restricted by a limiting, small, divisive Love; we're too big for that, God is too large. Our theology and faith teaches us "To proclaim the universal call – Be joyful Universalists." So don't hold back! Ours is a big tent with a very large table and plenty of room for everyone who shares the theology of inclusion instead of separation, of unity and not division. Let the theology and faith of generosity always be our **Guide**.

"R" is the next letter of GROWTH as we look at what creates, sustains and nurtures a healthy, vital, growing church. "R" stands for **Resource**. Each of you is the best resource for growing the church. And that means knowing about yourself and your congregation, which means that you must share your identity. As we heard in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, the church is like a body composed of different parts which – when working together for the good of the whole – shapes a well-running system, a healthy and growing system. But you know if only from looking around this room that bodies come in all shapes, sizes, colors and ages. Right? Well, the body called the church is the same. And remember this, one body is not necessarily better than another – "better" depends on what you want and where you want to go.

Imagine with me: Imagine your congregation as a human body (and perhaps it would be fun and instructive for you to do this with the members of your congregation).⁶ How would you describe this body? Is it large or small? Old or young? Stiff or flexible? If the body (your church) was a person, say more about it including its gender, age, occupation, health, fitness. What

kind of a future does it have and what challenges did it face in the past? You might even want to give your person/body/church a name. What is its name? When you personalize your congregation in this way, you strengthen it as a resource because you have given it an identity with features and characteristics; perhaps the congregation now becomes easier to talk about because you've created a personality for it. As a **Resource**, you now can talk about your congregation which is important for growth.

The third letter of GROWTH is "O," which represents **Others**. Who are the others in your community – on Negros Island – who need to hear about your church and about Unitarian Universalism? Perhaps you already know people who are Unitarian Universalists but they haven't attended your church yet – and in that case, you need to invite them! There are people who we see frequently and maybe you know they don't find their church meaningful or they don't even attend a church (but they think or talk like a Unitarian Universalist). This kind of personal knowledge or awareness of others who might be Unitarian Universalist is going to require something from you that many UUs find difficult: it's going to require that you explain our faith and your congregation. At least, that's what happens in the U.S.: When someone is invited to attend our church or comes for the first time, they want to know more. And will you be able to tell them your church's history and theology; will you tell them about the life of Rev. Quimada? Sharing yourself with others is so important – remember that you are your church's best resource. In other words, to have a healthy, vital, growing church you need new members, you need others to learn about and come to you. Will you be prepared to welcome **Others**?

But you can't do it all on your own, by yourself. This is why it's vital that you have the encouragement and support of good leadership who will help you shape a plan for identifying and welcoming others – creating a large scale effort to build and grow Unitarian Universalism. A plan is important, as the apostle Paul knew, because growth and stability don't just happen on their own. Let me tell you about one such effort. When I was here for your 50th Anniversary Celebration in 2005, there was a group of Christian missionaries staying at the same hotel where I was staying. We got to talking one afternoon and they told me about an organized effort they were supporting called "The 10/40 Window." Here's what it is:

The 10/40 Window is a term coined by Christian missionary strategist Luis Bush in 1990 to refer to those regions of the eastern

hemisphere located between 10 and 40 degrees north of the equator, a general area that in 1990 was purported to have the highest level of socioeconomic challenges and least access to the Christian message and Christian resources on the planet. The 10/40 Window concept highlights these three elements: an area of the world, with great poverty and low quality of life, combined with lack of access to Christian resources. The Window forms a band encompassing Saharan and Northern Africa, as well as almost all of Asia (West Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, East Asia and much of Southeast Asia). Roughly two-thirds of the world population lives in the 10/40 Window. The 10/40 Window is populated by people who are predominantly Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Animist, Jewish or Atheist. Many governments in the 10/40 Window are formally or informally opposed to Christian work of any kind within their borders.⁷

This is a massive effort, which includes the Philippines. The lesson for us to learn is not that we too need to be this bold, this big in our projections; frankly we could never undertake something this dramatic (at least not now, but who knows about the future). But we must learn that growing healthy congregations – at least, in terms of reaching out to others – won't simply happen all on its own. It takes planning and leadership, and then it means supporting the plan and those who are implementing the plan. It's clear from reading Paul's letters, especially his letter to the Corinthians, that he knew what he wanted and he had a plan that would take him (and the congregation) to his goal: He wasn't just leaving it to luck or grace, but doing the hard work, paying attention, and planning with others. We too can reach out to others. Listen to this story which makes my point effectively:

A priest was sitting at his desk by the window writing his sermon on trust and salvation when he heard something that sounded like an explosion. Soon he saw people running in a panic and discovered that a dam had burst, the river was flooding, and the people were being evacuated.

The priest saw the water begin to rise in the street below. He had some difficulty suppressing his own rising sense of panic, but he said to himself, "Here I am preparing a sermon on trust and salvation and I am being given an occasion to practice what I

preach. I shall not flee with the rest. I shall stay right here and trust that God will save me.

By the time the water reached his window, a boatful of people came by. “Jump in, Father,” they shouted. “Ah no, my children,” said Father confidently. “I trust in the saving power of God who will rescue me.”

Father did climb to the roof, however, and when the water got up there another boatload of people went by, urging Father to join them. Again he refused.

This time he climbed to the top of the church steeple. When the water came up to his knees, an officer in a motorboat was sent to rescue him. “No thank you, officer,” said Father, with a calm smile. “I trust that God will save me. He will never let me down.”

When Father drowned and went to heaven, the first thing he did was complain to God. “I trusted you to save me! Why did you let me down?”

“Well,” said God. “I did send three boats, you know.”⁸

We have to trust, plan and act together in order to grow our congregations because it won’t happen all on its own. Regardless of how much trust we place in Divine Authority, we each have the tools to grow the body – just as the priest had several rescue attempts. But unlike the priest, will we see what is right in front of us, the means we have to reach out to others? It’s up to us, now, to get to work! Together we can plan and build our appeal to **Others**.

“W” is next and stands for **What** is it that creates and sustains a church? Health is the answer. If a congregation is going to grow – just like a growing body – it has to be healthy. I know that everyone here knows what makes for a healthy church, but I want to remind you anyway:

H is for **Hospitality**. Your welcoming attitude makes all the difference for people who attend your church.

E is for **Enthusiastic**, which means “to be inspired by God or filled with the Spirit.” Your work and your worship as Unitarian Universalists must be enthusiastic.

A is for **Action**. Reaching out and living our UU Principles requires deliberate action because living our Principles is not easy, but right.

L is for **Leadership**. Strong and shared leadership is what the church in Corinth needed and it’s what every congregation must have to grow.

T means **Together**. In community, as a congregation working together toward your common goals, you can achieve your dreams.

H means **Helping**. This is what happens when you have a generous spirit: You want to help others in doing the work of the church.

Y means **Young**. By creating programs that support and feed the spirit of our young people we will ensure the future of Unitarian Universalism for generations to come.

With a **HEALTHY** church I promise that you will grow! Healthy congregations are **What** we need!

Now the last two letters in GROWTH. “T” stands for **Turning**, as in turning to the light, turning to love; turning to what is the right path to take, turning to God. It is so easy to get stuck by living lives in the same old ways – perhaps you are unhappy and bored; maybe you wish you could change. What will it take to turn away for the old ways, to turn away from the past? The turning that is meaningful for you is going to also be meaningful for your congregation. Try this: Begin to think and remember good experiences you had with what I was describing as a HEALTHY church. I’ll bet that many of you could name at least one good memory – and probably more – for each of the letters I listed (for example: When did you feel welcomed or welcoming? When was the congregation enthusiastic? When did you take action for another? Name a time there was strong leadership in your congregation? Etc.). Now ask yourself: What would it take to re-**turn** to those experiences and have the good feelings and meaning again? What is stopping you? Start **Turning!** It’s an opportunity for you to discover what makes for your deep satisfaction and what grows your church.

Finally “H,” which stands for **Holding**. One of the many things that makes church life unique is that we should be expected and willing to hold each

other – hold each other accountable for living the Principles of our faith; hold each other to what we commit to doing for our congregation; hold each other in a loving, caring manner as we weather the ups and downs of daily life. If Unitarian Universalism is going to deepen and broaden – if you are going to grow spiritually and if the UUCP is going to grow with members and opportunities – then it will be imperative for us to hold one another because we won't deepen and broaden our faith alone, but only with the help and support we give each other; each of us can do our part as a unique member of the body called the UUCP. Part of holding is serving – equally and willingly. Listen carefully to this story:

Once upon a time, the eldest and richest man in a village decided that it would be a good idea to give a feast for all of the townspeople at the start of the New Year. He called the council of ten elders together to plan the event. “I will provide the feast,” he said, “if you will each bring a jug of wine.” “Of course, of course,” they all agreed.

But as soon as they had parted, the youngest of the group was already cursing himself for having agreed to part with one whole jug of wine. He did not have much wine in his stores, and he did not want to spend money either. “There must be another way,” he told his wife. And he sat down to think.

After a while a smile crossed his face. “The other nine elders will pour wine into the common pot. Could one jug of water spoil so much wine?” “Hardly so, my clever husband,” she answered.

And so it was that on the day of the feast this man put on his finest robes, filled his jug with fresh water from the well, and went to the party. On his way he met up with the other elders. They were greeted at the party by the sounds of music playing, and the delicious smells of food cooking. The host motioned for the elders to pour their jugs of wine into a great clay pot in the courtyard. Then there was dancing and entertainment. The bell was rung and the guests were seated.

The elders sat together at the head table. The host ordered his servants to fill everyone's cups with the wine. Each of the elders waited patiently for the last guest to be served. They were anxious

to taste the fine, refreshing wine. The host gave the signal and the guests put their cups to their lips. They sipped, and sipped again. But what they tasted was not wine, but water, for each of them had thought, “One jug of water cannot spoil a great pot of wine.” Each of them had filled his jug at the well. They looked at each other sheepishly, avoiding the eyes of the host, and then continued to drink as if it were the finest wine their lips had ever tasted.

That day a new saying arose among the people of the village, a saying that spread around the world: “If you wish to take wine, you must give it also.”⁹

Life can be a struggle; we all experience setbacks. But there can also be wonderful joy and with joy comes gratitude and thanksgiving. When we share with each other both the turmoil and joy of living, we can lighten our loads. We learn from this story that holding each other must be done in a way that is fair, trusting and honest or our relationships can become deceitful and hurtful, and there should be no room for either in a religious community. When we, as members of a congregation, hold each other – when we offer ourselves to others without the expectation of something in return and do it with integrity, often just being there for another in order to support and help – when we participate in this kind of holding of each other, then we can walk forward as one and not as disengaged, disconnected parts of a poorly formed and weakened body. **Holding** requires commitment, it is filled with compassion. It’s one of the reasons we join a church.

Guide, Resource, Other, What, Turning, Holding – GROWTH. That’s what Paul is telling the congregation in Corinth. If we can keep these six characteristics in front of us, if we can remember what makes for a **HEALTHY** congregation (**H**ospitality, **E**nthusiasm, **A**ction, **L**eadership, **T**ogether, **H**elping, **Y**outh), then you can live and repeat: “I am an integral part for congregational growth.” Then you will be living the wisdom, vision, and the dream of Paul as described in his letter to the Church. Then you will be living “the hope that is for all;” **you** will be “the Universal Call.”

¹ J. Paul Sampley, "The First Letter to the Corinthians," *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Volume X, 2002, p. 771. Sampley's article provides all of the I Corinthians background information in this presentation.

² This story has been told from many cultural contexts. This version is Jain and can be found on the internet at <http://www.jainworld.com/literature/story25.htm>

³ GROWTH is my adaptation of the "path" developed by Dr. Marjorie H. Royce for the United Church of Christ (USA) entitled "Exploring Your Congregation's Vitality" which can be found at <http://www.ucc.org/vitality/ready-set-grow/discern-gods-mission/exploring-your-congregations.html>

⁴ This version is from Maglipay *Universalist: A History of the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Philippines*, 2001, p. 24.

⁵ Anthony de Mello, S.J., *Taking Flight: A Book of Story Meditations*, An Image Book, 1988, p. 60.

⁶ Adapted from Janet Cawley, *Who Is Our Church? Imagining Congregational Identity*, the Alban Institute, 2006.

⁷ *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/10/40_Window

⁸ De Mello, p. 97.

⁹ Elisa Davy Pearmain, editor, *Doorways to the Soul: 52 Wisdom Tales from Around the World*, The Pilgrim Press, 1998, p. 66.