



## Top 10 Reasons Why I Am On the Magi Network Board

Ron Robinson

**10. Because I was asked** by a colleague who knew of my dual passion for the Christian way and for starting new congregations.

**9. Because I knew it would grow my soul.** I am wary of "committees" that tend to maintain themselves instead of carry out God's mission, and I am aware of my own propensity to have too many irons in the fire. But I knew this was an opportunity to be engaged in important, challenging work.

**8. Because I have received so much in my years in our free churches, including so much from those who have both upheld and put forward the message of free Christianity.** They and their work has been there for me when I needed it, especially when I felt alone in the hinterlands following this path and this Teacher. But at heart UU Christianity is not backward-looking; as Emerson said, "God *speaks* not just *spoke*." We are at a particular turning point in history, and the embodiment of our faith needs to speak again, needs to still be making history not just recalling it.

**7. Because I believe in "the congregational way."** This heritage means so much to me. Each gathered community has the freedom and obligation to decide its theological orientation. Having an orientation and identity is not the

same as having a creed; in fact, having an explicit covenant helps ensure against "creeping creedalism" that might happen in relying exclusively on the UUA Principles and Purposes. We don't look to the state or bishops or a denomination to define the congregation; we look to the called community. We also don't bend to each individual. The congregation is the mediating agency that protects the church's right and obligation to set its identity and boundaries as well as protecting the individual's right of conscience in the community with which he or she has voluntarily chosen to be in association.



**6. Because more Christian churches within the UUA will help the wider Association both internally and externally.** Authentic community is enhanced by greater self-differentiation and a respect for particularities, not by seeking lowest common denominators. The Magi Network helps pluralism flourish. It also will make the UUA more attractive to the wider culture.

**5. Because it helps embody a fuller sense of "the body of Christ."** Free Christian churches in

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**Do you know someone who would like to join the Magi Network?**

Spread the word about the Magi Network to interested friends, family, coworkers, neighbors, or others:

- *If they have Web access, give them our URL:* [www.magi.uni.cc](http://www.magi.uni.cc).
- *Would you like to give them a pamphlet yourself? We'll send you some:* P.O. Box 486, Fenton, MI 48430-0468 or [magi@universalistchurch.org](mailto:magi@universalistchurch.org).

## Magi Network Revival

Nurya Love Parish

Have you wondered why you haven't heard from the Magi Network lately? (Have you even noticed? We've been silent, but not for long.)

When the Network began, I believed that all we needed was to gather the funds, and a new congregation organizing group would "magi"cally appear. So we did all our work to put together the Network: gathered a board, attained our 501(c)3 status, became an Independent Affiliate of the UUA, started soliciting for members. And sat back, and waited for the applications for funds to start rolling in...

And as you might have guessed, they never rolled. As president, it was discouraging.

*What were we going to do if no one wanted to start a church? Would we fold up and go away? Just wait around? Or, knowing that more souls needed to hear the good news UU Christianity can offer... would we take the bold step of working to found a congregation ourselves?*

In mid-January, the Board met in Boston for a two-day retreat. We invited guests from other UU Christian organizations: the UU Christian Fellowship (UUCF), the Council of Christian Churches within the UUA (CXCUIA), King's Chapel, First Parish in Weston, and the Independent Christian Church in Gloucester. We studied the Bible together, each person bringing a favorite text. We were interested

to note that the selections were grouped around three themes: love, liberty, and the longing for God. Could this say something about our message?

Together with our guests, we assessed the state of UU Christianity as we know it. We looked at the strengths and weaknesses of each institution, and dreamed an ideal future for UU Christianity. It was invigorating. Then the Magi Board met alone to do our own planning. There we made two exciting decisions.

Revive us again,  
that your  
people may  
rejoice in you  
— Psalm 85:6

*Decision #1 - Give one more push to Epiphany Community Church.* Ron Robinson remarked that Epiphany was still in need. We all realized that he was right, and that our original plan to cut Epiphany loose after last year was a mistake. Epiphany needs to become a strong, midsize congregation which is able to help start other churches. Why hasn't it become one? It's doing beautifully, with over sixty members and an average pledge of \$1800. But almost all new congregations started under the UUA's former system are hovering at that size too. The UUA is now exploring a new way of starting churches which

pours even more resources into them. They have concluded that a stronger start builds a stronger church. It's too late for Epiphany to be started under that model, so we have to build them up where they are now. They need a Director of Religious Education, and they need a publicity campaign in order to grow into that strong, midsize church.

They don't have the funds to make this happen on their own, and if we wait for them to grow into it independently it will take a while, and slow our movement to start more new congregations. So the Board decided to give Epiphany the push it needs. We will be directing our funding this year toward a DRE and postcard publicity campaign for Epiphany. We'll give more details along with the call.

But we also know that the need for new churches doesn't stop with Epiphany. Which brought us to...

*Decision #2 - Start new churches ourselves.* We gathered our courage and decided we needed to be proactive to start new congregations on our own. We are undertaking a demographic study to determine the site for the next new congregation. We will be asking the UUA, the CXCUIA, and the UUCF to provide information so that we can make the best possible decision about where to start that church, while we are studying the best strategy for starting that congregation. We will look at multiple options and determine which is most appropriate for this startup. Don't be surprised if we ask you to increase

your giving next year, or if we plan a major membership drive! We currently raise about \$5000 per call. That's not going to be enough to start a church!

Additionally, we were reminded that UUCF's **Revival 2003** is coming up next year--from February 27 to March 2, 2003 at Universalist National Memorial Church in Washington, D.C. (see [www.uua.org/uucf/revival](http://www.uua.org/uucf/revival)). We will have a plan for you there... a plan for where and how to start the next UU Christian congregation. If you want to be part of that plan, we ask you to contact us now so that we can put your information into the mix with everything else we are gathering.

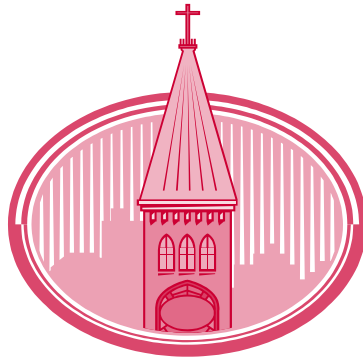
"Revive us again," the psalmist wrote. We have been revived, and we hope the spirit of that revival can carry to you as you read this. We ask your prayers as we seek God's grace in helping us plan this new congregation. as we step out in faith and boldness. We are counting on you to pray and be part of this new spirit of courage and daring as we plan another new UU Christian church for our broken and beautiful world. †

## Publishing Information

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association with churches of a wide theological range, as in the UUA, make for a broader (and I believe, better) understanding of what it means to be a Christian in the world today. To be a follower of Jesus is to be with "others." So the development of Christianity itself needs our witness today, as much or even more than it ever did in the past. We are called to embody Christ in the fullest way possible.



**4. Because the Magi Network represents a big and outrageous dream,** and I think that is in keeping with the image of God who has big and outrageous dreams for all of life, and for each of us.

**3. Because I believe we are undergoing a fundamental change in culture and worldview** the likes of which only come along a few times in history, usually in keeping with a major change in how we communicate with one another. This change means old ways of doing and being, such as old ways of doing and being *church*, will no longer be able to communicate to those in the new culture as they once could. And because it is much more difficult to get existing institutions to change than it is to plant new ones that understand these cul-

tural changes, the future of free Christianity depends on new church plants that can grow in the new cultural soil. This was what Paul faced in the first century, and it is what we face in the twenty-first.

**2. Because I am an evangelist.** I have witnessed the life and death impact and influence of helping to start a free church in a community where there wasn't one before.

**1. Because Jesus said "the Kingdom of God (kin-dom of God, God's realm, beloved community) is like a woman who took leaven and hid it in three measures of flour until it was all leavened."** I am not saying the Magi Network and our mission is a kind of holy and hidden yeast that needs to grow within the UUA until the UUA is all Christian once again. Rather, what I believe this parable says is that what society finds a corruption -- an outrage -- is the stuff of God's kind of world. The "leavening" process is literally one that mixes things up, that causes ferment and fermentation. That's the stuff of free Christianity--certainly a corruption in the eyes of some, and a conundrum or contradiction in the eyes of others.

The spread of such leaven is our way of growing God's kind of world, and why the Magi Network is needed and should be supported. †

### Board of Directors

*Nurya Love Parish*, President; *Ron Robinson*, Vice President; *Scott Wells*, Secretary; *Dean Drake*, Treasurer; *Anna R. Broskie*; *Larry Ladd*; *Carl Scovel*

## Lessons From the Epiphany Startup

Dean A. Drake

In the summer of 1993, the UU District of Michigan (UUDoM) allocated \$6,000 to seed the start of a specifically Christian congregation somewhere in the Detroit area. This effort led to the founding of Epiphany Community Church, Unitarian Universalist, in Fenton, Michigan, the first new Christian UU congregation to be started since the merger of Unitarianism and Universalism in 1961.

In starting Epiphany, the UU-DoM Extension Committee did not know exactly what kind of church would evolve from its efforts, but it was believed that a new UU Christian congregation, started with no preconceived notions of what was “normal” for Unitarian Universalism would be significantly different from most UU churches -- and hopefully, significantly healthier. Specifically, the committee had hoped to see a church that:

- † Attracted people to the congregation who were new to UUism, and not just attract dissatisfied UUs from other neighboring congregations.
- † Had a much more developed sense of mission and commitment than found in many other UU congregations.
- † Would be more culturally and socially diverse than most UU congregations, since the primary area of commonality would be theological.
- † Would be a part of the community in which it existed, seeing itself as a church, and not an alternative to church.

### How It Turned Out

In June 1996, Epiphany held its initial public meeting -- a four-part lecture by UU minister Davidson Loehr, a member of the Jesus Seminar, entitled “In Search of the Historic Jesus.” The sessions averaged 60 people in attendance, and twelve people interested in forming a church then met over the summer both planning the upcoming worship and discussing the book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. In September, Epiphany held its first service on Sunday evening.

In August 1997, after a somewhat rocky start, the congregation called the Reverend Nurya Love Lindberg (now Parish) as Epiphany's first full-time minister. On Epiphany Sunday, January 4, 1998, Epiphany Community Church was chartered as a member of the UUA with 32 members. Today, Epiphany has over 60 members, and is in search for a new minister.

So what is Epiphany today, how closely did it come to meeting original expectations, and what are the implications to the future of the UU Christian movement?

### The People of Epiphany

The survey conducted by Epiphany's Pulpit (Search) Committee provides some recent demographics. Membership is young, with over 40% under the age of 45. Members' income is average, with over half of the households making less than \$60,000 a year. Yet it is an incredibly generous congregation, with half the households contributing over \$2,000 a year.

The people of Epiphany are diverse, from all walks of life, including management and labor, educators, engineers, and full-time mothers (including several who home-school their children). The congregation includes members of all political and social persuasions, and view the maintenance of this diversity as one of its most important functions as a church community, living by its motto: “All are worthy, all are welcome.”

### Where We Came From

Only about a third of Epiphany's members were previously affiliated with another UU congregation. The remaining two-thirds came largely from other Christian traditions (about half the congregation) or were unchurched.

Since its second year (and to the consternation of the area fundamentalist ministers), Epiphany has been an active part of the local clergy group, the Fenton Area Clergy, and has participated with other churches in a number of community projects. Epiphany's ministers have participated with other ministers in the city's all-church services (Good Friday and Thanksgiving). Since Fenton has not been home to a UU church before, most people in the community see Unitarian Universalism through their experience with Epiphany -- a friendly, open-minded and diverse Christian religion with some unusual (but not offensive) doctrinal distinctions.

Members see the Unitarian and Universalist Christian message as the true meaning of Jesus' ministry: one member called this the “true Christian message -- all are worthy, all are welcome.” Another referred to a “Christian theology that invites but does not prescribe” while still another

talked of the “Christian focus while maintaining God’s Universal Love.”

### What Does It Mean?

It is clear that Epiphany has lived up to initial expectations. Most people attracted to a UU Christian church are new to Unitarian Universalism, and would only be attracted to our faith through the Christian message. By growing in a small community (population 10,000) whose demographics would be judged unsuitable for starting a typical UU congregation, Epiphany has also demonstrated the potential to grow the movement in areas where UUs are normally under-represented.

More importantly (and what makes this such an exciting ministry) is that many of Epiphany’s members were only able to form a relationship with God and an understanding of Jesus’ message through UU Christianity. These were people living in a Christian culture, surrounded by churches of nearly all denominations, who were estranged from God until they came in contact with a UU Christian church. Much to the embarrassment of many UUs, the Epiphany experiment has demonstrated the power of UU Christianity to save souls.

Also, the culture of Epiphany Community Church is different from many other UU congregations. It is more generous (with an average pledge of nearly \$2,000), more diverse, and more mission-oriented. Its approach to membership, for example, was deemed so novel and healthy that it was written up in the UUA’s Commission on Appraisal report *The Meaning of Membership*. While not without

many of the same conflicts that strain other churches, Epiphany is pioneering ways to resolve those conflicts without serious damage to the health of the congregation. A recent example is the Congregational Conversation group, a structured approach to dialogue on social issues of interest to the congregation and the greater UU movement that respects a wide range of views.

### What About the Future?

The Magi Network’s mission is to expand UU Christianity through the founding of new congregations. The Epiphany experience has demonstrated that such congregations can be started, and be successful, even in areas of the country that have never heard of UU Christians (or UUism, for that matter).

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Epiphany has also shown that such new congregations can be different from mainstream UU congregations, and even from existing UU *Christian* congregations. They are likely to be younger, more diverse, more dynamic and less isolationist than existing UU congregations. And Epiphany has shown that new congregations offer the potential of growing the UU movement, and specifically growing it with members who are faith-filled, generous, committed -- and Christian. It is important to note

that from the end of WWII until the 1970s, the percentage of UUs who defined themselves as Christian had been on the decline, until most UUs self-identified as Humanist. Yet since 1979, the percentage of UUs who define themselves as Humanist has fallen from 72% to 46%, while those calling themselves Christian rose slightly, to 10%. But 10% is still not enough to matter when it comes to allocating budget money in the UU universe. As a result, UU Christian churches needing R.E. curricula, hymnal supplements, meditation manuals -- or almost anything keyed to the Revised Common Lectionary or the Christian Year -- need to generate these materials themselves or adapt them from more orthodox Christian churches. A significant successful program of starting other churches like Epiphany would not only increase the number of UUs, but would strengthen the Christian voice within the UUA.

### Only a Beginning

Epiphany is a successful beginning -- but it is only a beginning. It is a prototype that shows UU Christians that new congregations can be started, and offers a model of what can be done. The next challenge for the Magi Network will be to replicate this success elsewhere in ever-increasing numbers. Back in 1993, when I first embarked on this mission, I was not a Christian. Today, I count myself as one of those able to get into a relationship with God because of UU Christianity and a congregation like Epiphany. There are many, many others out there like me. Starting new UU Christian churches is not our work, it is God’s work. And God is counting on us not to fail. †



## Contributing to the Renaissance of Unitarian Universalist Christianity

### Why New UU Christian Churches?

Carl Scovel

I've never started a UU Christian church, but I know one person who has, and others who want to -- and from my perspective as a minister of an *old* UU Christian church I think I understand.

During my 32 years at King's Chapel I met many men and women who were raised (or rehabilitated) in mainline UU churches. In these churches they had heard few prayers, only occasional Bible readings, almost no mention of the Christian year and oblique references to God and Jesus. When they arrived at King's Chapel, these people met the worship service, scripture, sacraments and piety with a mixture of anger and fascination. If fascination won, they stayed; but only if they were ready to re-read the tradition honestly and thoroughly.

Talking with and watching these people rediscover the words of Jesus, the story of Israel and the church, the prayers of the faithful, the praise of the congregation and the reflections of Christian teachers

and writers -- this was the high point of my ministry.

These people taught me even as they learned and they energized me when I was bogged down with financial and administrative minutia. They reminded me of what the church was really about.

To ensure that  
**everyone** whose life  
would **benefit** from  
the **practice** of **UU**  
**Christianity** has  
**access** to and  
**room** in a  
nearby  
**congregation**

I think of the hard-bitten, rational lawyer who wrote me after his baptism: *As I took communion for the first time, not knowing what to expect, I felt that I had been missing an*

*important part of the church's spiritual experience... Thinking back on that experience, I realize that at that moment I had allowed Jesus Christ to enter my life.... I am blessed to have found a home with "the people of God."*

I think of the lifelong UU dying of cancer to whom I said during a conversation in Holy Week, "It's like a crucifixion, isn't it?" And she answered, "*That's what tradition does, doesn't it? It gives you words to describe what's happening to you.*"

I think of the thirty-some Unitarian Universalists whom I baptized at King's Chapel, three of whom were ministers at that time. And I think of worshipping with the congregation at Epiphany -- a whole church of rediscovering UUs and many others, including the unchurched -- and the power and intelligence I felt with those people.

It's pretty simple: until there are enough UU Christian churches that "everyone whose life would benefit from the practice of UU Christianity has access to and room in a nearby congregation," there will be a pressing need for more. †

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