

We Are Called To Be Digitally Present

Digital life can't be ignored if we're serious about creating a world we want to live in. Two-thirds of adults in the U.S.A. use social networks and more than 85 percent of teens are regularly on one.* Use abroad is greater. If we do not have a meaningful religious presence online, we won't be authentically present in the world. Digital ministry could save UUism from marginalization – a reality which hurts our ability to do the work of love, compassion, and justice. REACH: A UU Digital Ministry Program gives congregations the tools for unleashing beloved community and for manifesting a higher good online.

Having the means is critical. Knowing how to use them, how to marry engagement strategies and tactics, is another. This program will show you how. It focuses on congregations and treats them as institutions that outlive present members and clergy. The infrastructure of digital ministry requires the same commitment and careful consideration as our physical buildings. You won't please everyone with your online presence, and you can't let whims dictate what occurs in your digital ministry or how it's built.

What is Digital Ministry? It is a set of collaborative, social practices that administer pastoral care, radical hospitality, witnessing, worship, religious education, and community. For UUism, it manifests our beliefs, values, and deeds wherever people gather digitally. It is inherently a blended experience of online and offline cultures because each intentionally influences the other. It uses tools and services that collectively are known either as social media or social networking. Digital ministry is not a top-down, one-way communication like traditional church marketing or like forms of media that broadcast messages one way from a source of authority to the masses.

UU congregations that have integrated social media - such as the UU of Arlington VA (UUCAVA) and the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia – know that social media draws newcomers into sanctuaries. But do they come back? UUCAVA's anecdotal evidence suggests they don't and other churches report the same. We are far from mastering a meaningful connection between our offline and online churches. For digital ministry to be successful, the offices of love must work in tandem in both places.

*<http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Social-Networking-Sites.aspx>, 2011 Pew Internet and American Life Project report.

If you think topping a box office record compares with someone telling you online that your work helped them through a rough time, then you don't understand which one is more important to me. -- Josh Whedon, filmmaker

We can look to the successes of businesses, non-profits, and politic organizations for relationship *tactics* that drive participation in both worlds and integrate them.

They all use a variety of marketing tools to create digital behavior that leads back and forth between restaurants, museums, and political demonstrations.

Digital ministry, however, *is about engagement* not marketing. Marketing is about *relating to* others, not with them. Marketing promotes products, services, and charitable causes that are paid for in some way. It expects something back: a purchase; a registered membership; a donation; rights to your personal information; or to your physical presence to get a stated benefit such as a discount in an offline store.

Digital ministry is about relating with others – about mutual caring, giving, and witnessing. It serves a higher good not a profit and loss statement. It ministers and doesn't do traditional "church marketing." Our digital presence must be an authentic connection with individuals with whom we want to grow; with whom we want to learn; and with whom we can give much to the world.

Perhaps UU congregations struggle to keep newcomers because we *relate to* people and *not with them*. We practice traditional marketing out of our Welcome desks and pamphlet-like websites. We answer questions, hand out fliers, and then wait for people to return without any further meaningful effort to demonstrate how we accompany each other and how we together practice radical hospitality.

"These days, insecure in our relationships and anxious about intimacy, we look to technology for ways to be in relationships and to protect ourselves from them at the same time." –Sheri Turkle, author, psychologist, and MIT scholar.

Newcomer and existing UU retention, though is a much more nuanced challenge to be sure. The difference between *relating with* and *relating to*, however, includes degrees of intimacy that culturally and individually many UUs probably find challenging.

Relating with is more than being empathetic and intentionally mindful, which is what *relating to* is about. "Walking in your shoes," as a favorite UU song goes, is relating to others. Put yourself in another's situation and you can *relate to* them better, understand them better. Relating *with* people inherently means that we wear the same shoes and then *co-create moments and experiences spontaneously when we walk together*. In this

**The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes
almost out of sight.**

**They seem to become
natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half submerged balls.**

-- Marge Piercy

way, our spiritual journeys and beloved communities have characteristics of being decentralized and more intimate because we rely on each other to create a lasting community. We take more risks when we relate *with others* than when we relate to them. Relating to others still keeps individuals at arms length on an emotional level where longing and the need to belong exists.

Meanwhile, all though we UUs are independent thinkers, many of us have a tendency to act as though all aspects of church leadership are centralized in the roles of the ministers. We may look to them for too much direction because many of us grew up, lived, and worked in top-down cultures; many of us may confuse the ministers with parent-like figures; and the profession itself forces clergy to function as executive directors and religious leaders – roles that some find to be in conflict and harmful to the longevity of a congregation.

But workplace culture today, where human gifts and talent play out for many professional, educated people 55 and under, is an “open-source” like experience. Leaders coach and collaborative teams of workers make decisions.

Digital ministry is an “open-source” ministry. Just as open-sourced software is code that is continuously modified by anyone who uses it, digital ministry is a fluid, adaptive, and collaborative effort.

Without digital ministry, it will be difficult to attract those whom *we* claim have UU values. We cite various sources repeatedly that say surveys of religions affiliations in the U.S. reveal that hundreds of thousands of individuals believe they are UUs. But in reading details of the reports, I wonder whether we are reading into the data. Individuals may express values that are UU but do they recognize them as being UU? I find it hard to believe they do. National surveys of religious identity indicate that less than 1 percent of the US population literally reports being UU. *

[*\["U.S. Religions Landscape Survey," The Pew Forum on Public Life and Religion, Feb. 2008\]](#)

Without digital ministry, many will keep trying to satisfy basic relationship needs through technology, which will only impede one's journey toward wholeness.

Although human beings are more connected than ever before, more of us are lonely and don't know, or have forgotten, what face-to-face relationships feel like. UU digital ministry must be a caring bridge between our digital and flesh-and-blood selves.

In 2012, UUA President Peter Morales offered a vision of UUism called [“Congregations & Beyond.”](#) It underscores the need for our faith to practice online for ensuring the religion's future. He explains that our identity, as expressed through each of us, can create a collective digital presence.

I think of it this way: Our behavior and presence online is our best engagement tool – our best example of living UU values.

We must rise up from the pews to serve each other and a hurting world. Through social media tools, digital ministry enables the priesthood of believers. We witness the daily mundane aspects in each other's lives through status comments, photos, and shared content on Facebook and Twitter. When we “like” or “share” those posts, we honor and hold the ordinary instead of dismissing it through inaction or indifference.

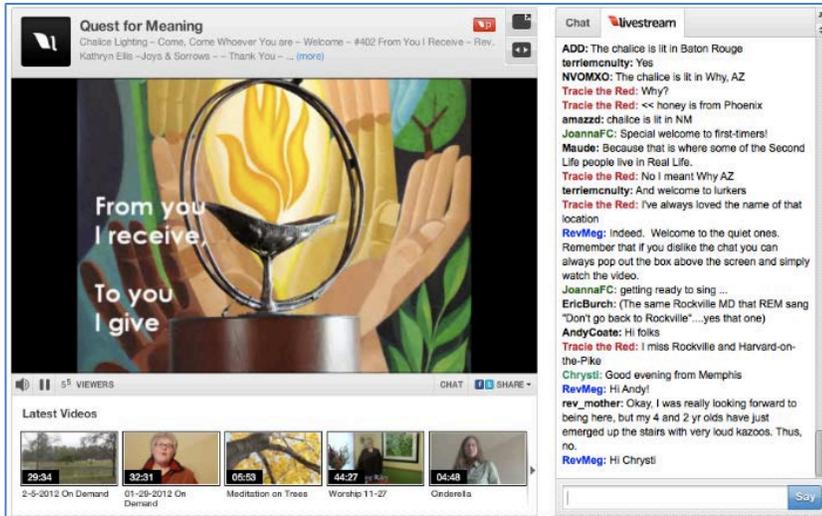
In April 2012, participants at a Joseph Priestly District UU session attended a Sunday service led by Rev. Carlton Elliott Smith of the UU of Arlington VA. They participated from a Marriott hotel a few miles away.

“We felt like we were right there with you,” said one of the JPD attendees.

So the question for UU digital ministry is: Can we leverage digital life to reach people where they are but then move them into a blended experience of online and offline religious communities?

The UUA's Standing on The Side of Love is a blended offline-online ministry. It reaches UUs where they are. It mobilizes us for demonstrations of support for local and national activism. It's positioned as a “public advocacy campaign that seeks to harness love's power to stop oppression.” Inspiring the general public to attend a local UU, however, is not part of its mission.

Outposts of UUism on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and in blogs are trying to attract individuals into their congregations. Plus, several UU churches have used live streaming to “bring” those online into their sanctuaries.



For example, when the UUA streamed the All Souls memorial service of Rev. Forrest Church, I felt as if I was there - at least I felt transported into the New York City church from my Virginia home. I wasn't in the pews, but I was "there" through intense, mindfulness. My physical body, my eyes and ears, took it all in - the tributes, the music, the close-up views of faces of those in attendance.

The Church of the Larger Fellowship is the only UU church that worships exclusively online. It delivers a limited experience. Sr. Minister Rev. Meg Riley combines pre-recorded video homilies, meditations, and music for Sunday and Monday services.

CLF's members who gather in an auditorium chat room then watch the service together in real time and participate by chatting. Rev. Riley's authenticity and caring presence is clear. The same can be said of other ministers who contribute to CLF services. Some homilies are far more intimate as videos than as pulpit preaching. They take place in kitchens or gardens where everyday life occurs.

It's difficult, though, to feel the presence of all CLF members together. You "see" CLF members through their names and comments. You know they are paying attention because they enter comments about how they are participating in the service.

When the video of CLF's chalice lighting appears, members type: "The chalice is lit in NYC." When there's a moving reading, someone says, "I'm crying." When Sweet Honey on The Rock sings "We Who Believe," many people say, "I'm singing." I sometimes join the singing because others are too. But it's still just my voice in my kitchen.

Do I really know who is behind the names in the chat room? No. I can't turn to my pew neighbors, shake their hands, and look into their eyes. I can't hear their voices. There's no CLF choir. I could order and send chicken soup through an online service for pastoral care. But, I can't sit and have a bowl with the person. Meanwhile, I won't know if someone doesn't show up for services for a few weeks. I can't check in on them either because I don't have their email addresses or phone numbers.

Rev. Riley is experimenting with ways to overcome these constraints. She's working to connect her church members to local UUs for pastoral care. With 3,200+ CLF members worldwide, there's no way that she and her fellow digital ministers can attend to each one of them. It will take time and experimentation for CLF to discover best practices for worship.

Nonetheless, online worship is a good substitute for those who cannot go to a local church. But it is missing something, and we have yet to see if it's possible to manifest the founding concepts of a religious community, says Rev. Galen Guengerich.

For him, one concept that is lost is the conversation between the pulpit and the pews, meaning the multi-sensory, mindful, collective human presence that experiences and manifests that which is holy.

"It's the most difficult aspect of our identity to translate into the online world," Rev. Guengerich says. "The key is our relationship to the formative act of a religious community. Everything we do (online) should lead us to the sanctuary."

The UU of Lancaster, PA, might be the only congregation that is ready to figure out how to be a bridge between its online presence and its sanctuary. It has launched a new site that combines databases, engagement tools, content publishing, and social networking environments. As Sr. Minister Rev. Peter Newport leads his congregation into a blended experience, he'll have the means to track the church's progress. His church's site uses Drupal as its platform. We'll explore it and others in this REACH program.