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## Unitarian Universalists follow Nordstrom's lead

**Liberal denomination will consolidate its Twin Cities churches at the Mall of America**

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It looks like upscale retailing is coming to a religion near you! On the heels of *The Star-Tribune's* feature story pointing out that Nordstrom's has just one full-line store in Minnesota, it has been revealed that the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) plans to consolidate its Twin Cities congregations into a single megachurch at the Mall of America.

It is rumored that the Unitarian Universalists will take over the space formerly occupied by Marshall Field's, which was recently sold to Federated Department Stores by its previous owner, the Target Corporation. While neither confirming nor denying the UUA's acquisition of this prime Mall of America anchor location, Minneapolis-based Harlan Limpert, the liberal denomination's Director of District Services and a former senior manager at Target, angrily denied suggestions that there was an inside deal between the UUA and Target. "Do I look like Martha Stewart?" bellowed Limpert. "If we have acquired this space – and I'm not saying that we have – but *if* we have, then the deal was entirely transparent. If you're looking for a smoking gun, I'd suggest that you ask the Baptists about Haliburton!"



While refusing to go into details about the situation in Minneapolis, suggesting that further information would become available when appropriate, the UUA's Coordinator of Services for Large Congregations, Stefan Jonasson, was less defensive about the denomination's change in strategy. "Yes, we're seeking to enhance liberal religion's market share in America by streamlining and reorganizing how we serve our members." Critics immediately jumped on his remarks, saying that the UUA was using words like "streamlining" rather than "rationalizing" in order to distance itself from its humanist past. Moreover, many noted that Jonasson talks about "America," although he is based in Winnipeg because the Immigration and Naturalization Service will not allow him to enter the United States on a permanent basis, owing to his alleged ties to 11/20, a little-known incident that has been overshadowed by oblique references to other dates. "Jonasson's prattle about 'liberal religion in America' simply rings hollow," according to a long-time Unitarian Universalist who asked not to be identified.

Still, Jonasson has developed an almost cult-like following among those who advocate "super-sizing" the denomination's 1,000+ congregations. "Some experts estimate that fully half of the small churches in America will disappear during the coming twenty-five years. We simply want to help those congregations die with the least pain and the greatest dignity. It's all outlined in a report published by our UUA Growth Team – *The Right to Die: A Guide for Fellowships and Other Small Congregations.*" Noting that the Unitarian Universalist Association has historically consisted primarily of small congregations, skeptics of the plan suggest that the UUA cannot survive without its small-market locations.

Jonasson describes the new strategy as the "department congregation." Like the department store, department congregations bring together all of the goods and services customarily provided by churches in a single, centralized location, providing religious consumers with convenience, competitive pricing, and extended hours. "By consolidating our operations into 200 department congregations, while selling several of our smaller locations to the Quakers, we expect to quadruple our membership and dramatically reduce costs by off-loading our most cantankerous and troublesome groups," he said. "The Quakers like conflict because it allows them to practice their pacifist ideals, whereas it has always been a costly nuisance to us, since we feel obliged to commit staff resources to conflict management."

"We're not abandoning smaller communities," insists Jonasson. The denomination has reportedly sold its historic Boston-based Church of the Larger Fellowship to Amazon.com, which will launch UUs@Amazon.com in the New Year. A spokesperson for the on-line merchandising giant said that it had originally planned on marketing liberal religion through a web site called Amazon.uu but focus groups tended to confuse the site with Amazon.uk. "It's just as well," said the Amazon spokesperson, "since Canadian Unitarians were demanding their own separate web site. So, this way we can serve them at UUs@Amazon.ca."

#### **CHANGES BEGAN AT THE TOP**

Current UUA President Bill Sinkford, widely known as the first former cosmetics industry executive to head a major religious denomination in America, fully supports the change in direction. "We're not talking about cosmetic changes here," he recently said. "We're talking about major structural changes that will fundamentally transform Unitarian Universalism in America, giving our faith the kind of foundation that will allow us to face the world without having to blush." A strident group of accessibility activists who are concerned that few congregations have established fragrance-free zones in their sanctuaries look upon the president's past with some suspicion, accusing him of excessive cosmetic references and fearing that he might introduce animal testing as part of the new strategy. "We're not prepared to block these changes," said one, "as long as Sinkford promises they will make no scents."



Sinkford's presidency was not without controversy before the "department congregations" initiative. Last year, he provoked a heated theological debate by his call for Unitarian Universalists to reclaim the language of reverence. At first, this call went almost unnoticed. "We thought he was talking about the language of *reference*," claims David Schafer, the head of the largest UU humanist group, "so we naturally assumed that he was challenging us to adopt a new method for footnoting sermons and pamphlets. When we realized that he was talking about God and prayer and the Holy ... well, all hell broke loose. Not literally, of course. We don't believe in a literal hell. It's a metaphor." When challenged about whether it was ever acceptable to use religious language, Schafer relented, "Well, I suppose it's o.k. to *sing* about heaven and hell, as long as it's in German or Latin, so no one understands it."

While Sinkford has weathered the storm since this controversy first erupted, it's too soon to say how he'll contend with the expected eruption of Mount St. Helens, since those opposed to his call for a language of reverence are demanding that he refer to the volcano as Mount Ms. Helens. "All this 'saint talk' smacks of more of this reverence stuff," complained one anonymous member.

#### **INTERNAL CHALLENGES REMAIN**

Negotiators are working to resolve an internal conflict over the name of the new megachurch, freely admitting that the name coined by the consolidation committee – "The-First<sup>2</sup>-Unitarian-Unity-Universalist Church<sup>4</sup>-Fellowship<sup>2</sup>-Society of Minneapolis, St. Paul, Arden Hills, Bloomington, Mahtomedi and Wayzata" – seems to lack "punch" for publicity purposes. A Minneapolis-based public relations consultant described the name as "cumbersome and unimaginative."

The naming controversy seems to obscure even deeper divisions. When a member of the Michael Servetus Unitarian Society noted that "Fridley" was not included in the name, a representative of the consolidation committee conceded, "We don't really have a burning desire to include all of the existing congregations in the new megachurch."

Governance is also likely to be a problem. Following the lead of other large churches, the new congregation will be organized around a modified version of Policy Governance™. Some commentators have hinted that "modified" is an understatement, suggesting that the seventeen-person Executive Team could prove to be unworkable, even though it is proportionate in size to the proposed 126-member board of trustees. "It may have been a mistake to promise existing office-holders an equivalent place in the new organizational structure," laments the chair of the seventy-member nominating committee, acknowledging that the committee has experienced some difficulty in filling the slate of officers. When asked for his comment, John Carver, the world's leading authority on Policy Governance™ would only say, "Policy Governance™ is a universal model of governance that applies to every conceivable circumstance: nations and states, cities and school boards, hospitals and churches, even the nuclear family ... or the

nuclear power plant! I invented it. It's a brilliant concept and truly universal. Did I mention that Policy Governance™ is trademarked?"

## BEYOND THE TWIN CITIES

When asked whether or not there were any metropolitan areas where the Unitarian Universalists might maintain more than one congregation, a spokesperson hinted that the denomination expects to maintain two locations in the nation's capital. "With America as divided as it is, we didn't feel we could risk allowing Democrats and Republicans to worship together, even though church stewardship is one area where both groups seem to favor massive tax rollbacks – sorry, I meant to say *tithe* rollbacks – especially for the wealthiest members."



Unitarian Universalist Republicans have been very critical of the UUA's "Uncommon Denomination" campaign, noting that the color of the marketing materials favors the so-called "blue states." In response, the UUA blended blue and red together to reflect greater political inclusiveness.



Religious demographer George Barna scoffed at the thought of separate Unitarian Universalist congregations for supporters of the nation's two largest political parties. "One of their ministers recently preached a sermon called *Republicans and Sinners*, twisting the biblical reference to suit his leftist bias, which is all too common among these people. These Unitarians claim to be welcoming to Republicans and other historically-marginalized groups – some even suggest that GOP supporters make up a quarter of the denomination's membership – but my polling doesn't turn up that many.

And when you probe beneath the surface of a UU Republican, you find they share most of the permissive values of Democrats anyway. Just because they register as Republicans doesn't mean that they're decent, conservative people. Just look at [former Oregon senator] Hatfield and [Nixon-era attorney-general] Richardson. You might as well claim [Massachusetts senator] Ted Kennedy as a Republican."

The denomination concedes that they don't really plan to have two full-service department congregations in Washington. "Well, sure, the two congregations won't be *exactly* the same," admitted one UU publicist. "The Republican church will be organized on a convenience store format in suburban Arlington, but we're confident that this will offer enough religion for those Republicans who choose not to be evangelical or fundamentalist Christians."

"This new approach will certainly be less expensive than the Metropolitan Strategy we had been contemplating," claims Tracey Robinson-Harris, the UUA's Director for Congregational Services, Real Estate and Telemarketing. "Here we were putting enormous energy into raising the capital needed for new congregation starts, when we already had the necessary resources tied up in smaller, low-prophet congregations. By liquidating those under-performers, we were able to generate considerable investment capital. And the locations we sold to Starbucks

and Krispy Kreme were particularly lucrative, especially when those companies were willing to include billboard space in the deal.”

### **JUST THE BEGINNING**

UUA officials dismiss concerns about competition from specialty religions and big box churches. They note that Pagans ‘n’ Things is not likely to be a threat at the Mall of America, since it prefers to locate in abandoned strip malls surrounded by forested areas. As far as Falwell’s is concerned, the Unitarian Universalists note that there is little direct competition, except when Falwell’s members feel they’ve been misled or abused by church management.

Other retailers in the Mall of America believe that the UUA has its eyes on Camp Snoopy, expecting the denomination to move its Camp Unistar to the location currently occupied by America’s largest mall-based amusement park. “Let’s face it,” said one young mother with her children in tow, “those religious liberals would ruin Camp Snoopy. They’d replace the Ripsaw Roller Coaster with some sort of emotional roller-coaster, the Skyscraper Ferris Wheel with a riding flaming chalice, and the bumper cars with public transit. And you can bet your last dollar that they’d convert the Kite Eating Tree into a meditation garden. And the food. Do you have any idea how many of those people are vegetarians and vegans? Poof! Overnight there’d be no more Danish pastry or ice cream. Who’d want to bring their kids to a place like that?”



Local church leaders dismiss such talk as baseless conspiracy theories. But concerned amusement-environmentalists note that the recent *Star-Tribune* feature on Nordstrom’s revealed that “the chain plans to grow its square footage by 2 to 3 percent for the next several years, and 50 markets have been identified for new stores.” They see parallels in the UUA’s recent history, which saw the denomination grow at a rate of one new member per congregation per year, while a recent report by the denomination’s New Congregations Task Force called for the creation of ten new large congregations each year for next five years, for a total of 50 new congregations. “Some might say this is just a coincidence, but we don’t think so.”

What’s clear to everyone is that the Unitarian Universalists, long considered to be excessively cautious and conventional in their approach to doing church, are leading the way as they embrace new strategies to increase their influence on the religious life of America. If they are successful, it will only be a matter of time before many transnational corporations decide to get religion too!