



Starting a new congregation from scratch

'There are more people here interested in what we have to offer than you might think.'

By [Donald E. Skinner](#)

Fall 2007 8.18.07

Sue Otte had barely discovered Unitarian Universalism when she helped start a congregation in Decorah, Iowa. Dick Meyer, also new to the faith, didn't plan on restarting a fifty-year-old fellowship in western Nebraska, but that's what happened. David Dodd and Diana Spaulding had been part of several UU congregations and were tired of driving twenty miles to church in the San Francisco Bay Area, and that's how there came to be a new congregation in Petaluma.

Three groups of people who had a dream and made it happen. Three new congregations. Those of us who work to keep our existing congregations going know how much time and energy that takes. But starting a congregation from the ground up? What would that require?

"It consumed us at times," said Otte, "but we knew it would. We went into this with our eyes open. And there have been so many rewards already. I think of the woman in her eighties who said during Joys and Concerns, 'I've been waiting for this my whole life.'"

Otte's congregation, called the Northeast Iowa UU Fellowship, is sixty-five miles from the nearest other UU congregation. It meets in a historic downtown church. Decorah would seem a promising place for a UU congregation. The community of 8,000 is home to 2,500-student Luther College (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America).

At first Otte was worried that not enough people would come. "There are so many good projects and groups in our community we feared that some folks wouldn't have enough time for a new one," she said.

But come they did. Started in 2003, the congregation has fifty-three members now. Seventeen to twenty-five people gathered on Sundays that first year. Knowing the key to growth would be religious education, the congregation, even before it was affiliated with the UUA, offered an Our Whole Lives (owl) sexuality education program to the community. It also offered an adult "interpretation of the Bible" class, led by a Luther professor, which had up to fifty attendees. When it started a religious education program last fall thirty-five kids showed up.

It did other things that were important to its growth. The congregation is part of a regular rotation of religion writers for the local paper. "Two or three times a year we write a piece, letting people know something about who we are," Otte said. "We always get comments." A member produced a DVD for prospective members including personal spiritual histories of some members and how they came to be a part of this UU community. It plays weekly on the local access TV channel.

"It's been a good beginning," said Otte, who has served as service leader and board president. "When we think of how far we've come in four years we're encouraged and excited about our future."

Diana Spaulding, her husband David Dodd, and their two children live in Petaluma, California, north of San Francisco, but until 2002 they were driving to church in San Rafael, about twenty miles away. "It was just taking too long," Spaulding said. "We really did want a congregation in our own community so we could invite our friends." Both were experienced with UU congregations. She was chair of the worship associates program at San Rafael. He taught religious education, owl, and was on the stewardship team. He had also previously been board chair and chair of worship at the Oakland congregation.

They called a meeting in January 2002, drawing eight adults and eight kids. The group began meeting in homes and eventually moved into rental space. Today they have services at the Woman's Club in downtown Petaluma. Thirty to fifty people attend Sunday services. Ten to eighteen children, led by a quarter-time director of religious education, attend religious education classes each Sunday.

Spaulding was chair of worship for four years, but turned that over to someone else and serves now on the board and as a worship associate. Dodd plays the piano, helps with the choir, does the website, serves on the membership committee, helps with stewardship, and was on the governing board for three years.

"A lot of this is for our children," Spaulding said. "They're seven and ten, and we want them to have values they can hold on to." She added, "Despite all the work, we have no regrets. I can't imagine my life without this group of people."

Scottsbluff, Nebraska, might not be the first place one would look for a Unitarian Universalist congregation, but there it is, thanks to the vision of Dick Meyer and others. Meyer grew up in the Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod), but moved away from that as a young adult. After moving to Scottsbluff thirty years ago, Sunday mornings were given over to reading or resting up from his landscaping business.

Occasionally his wife Marsha would host a half dozen folks from what was left of a UU fellowship formed in the 1950s. He wasn't really interested, but he'd catch a little of their conversation and found himself sitting in on their gatherings. Then in 1999 he and Marsha attended a UUA Mountain Desert District gathering at Estes Park, Colorado. That's when his Sunday mornings changed forever.

"We came away with a much better understanding of Unitarian Universalism," he said. He felt moved to form a congregation. He gathered others in Scotts bluff and revitalized the nearly defunct fellowship, calling it the Prairie Vista UU Congregation. For three years the group met at a local arts center and then lucked into a building for sale at \$100,000, giving the congregation, which now has thirty members, room to seat 120. Meyer said he expects the congregation to grow to fifty in two years.

"The one comment we hear consistently from visitors is 'I never thought I'd find a group like this in western Nebraska,'" he said. "That's part of what keeps me going. That, and knowing there are more people here who would be interested in what we have to offer than you might think."

How to get started

People who want to start a congregation should first call their UUA district executive, said Nancy Bowen, district executive in the Mountain Desert District. "We can tell them if others in their area have expressed an interest, and we can help guide them through the process of organizing a congregation." To reach your district executive, visit uuu.org/DIST. The Church of the Larger Fellowship also offers services and resources to small and emerging congregations. For more information go to clfu.org.
