

Planning a Ministry Focus from Your Ministry Area Profile



The three key questions regarding the purpose of a congregation are, Who are we? What are we called to do? and Who is our neighbor? The Ministry Area Profile answers the question, Who is our neighbor? In so doing, it can also help to answer the question, What are we called to do? The Ministry Area Profile has various practical uses for a congregation. The focus of this discussion of the Ministry Area Profile is on answering the question, Who is our neighbor?—that is, Who lives and works near our church?—and on what we are called to do that could meet their needs. When a congregation organizes its programs in this manner, by considering who will come and what they need, powerful life-changing ministries can emerge.

The Unitarian Universalist Association has contracted with Percept Group, Inc., to offer special rates to Unitarian Universalist Association member congregations for the Ministry Area Profile. This profile is a substantial set of demographic data covering a geographic area defined by the person ordering the study. (For more information about Percept Group and ordering a Ministry Area Profile for your congregation, please see UUA.org, Leaders' Library, then search "Demographic Research."*)

One of the steps you can take when you receive your Ministry Area Profile is to look at which groups of people you can serve in ministry and what ministry will meet their particular needs. We already know that many newcomers enter our church through a "side door," as their first point of contact is not a Sunday worship service. These folks come to a group, a class, or a program. Some come because of a friend's invitation, and others come because they saw an advertisement or notice. They come because they are interested in the event and it meets a need—for example, to make a friend, to socialize, or to learn more about a particular topic. Many of our congregations could be more intentional in the variety of programming they offer and could even look at programming as an outreach tool. Programming at its best in our congregations is ministry.

As an example, you might already know that you serve middle-aged, partnered couples. Your Ministry Area Profile might show you that this group is concerned about aging parents. Thus, you might decide to serve this current group in a broader way by offering classes on the aging process and helping to identify what services are available for aging adults in the local area or in communities across the country. You might even offer a support group for adults who are caretakers for parents that are aging, ill, or both. After some success, your congregation might decide to expand these two programs (the classes and the support group) to include new people in the community. The educational classes are advertised in the community, and after newcomers have attended a few times, they are also told about the support group for caregivers. During the classes, they see literature about the congregation and the other programs and weekly worship services. Some of these people start attending the church. All have benefited from the ministry, which has met a very real need of theirs.

Another effort might be to reach out to a new group that you have not yet served. Your Ministry Area Profile might show you that the demographic makeup of your area is changing. As an example, your area might be popular for retirees. However, it is now expanding, with younger families as the fastest-growing segment. Your congregation does not currently have a religious education program. Some of the members remember religious education programs from the past, when their children were young. In addition to speaking with the district religious education staff or district program consultant, the Unitarian Universalist Association's Lifespan Faith Development staff group, and a local religious education director, this congregation might want to offer the curriculum "Parents as Resident Theologians" and advertise in the community—particularly in new housing developments where the younger families might live. (When reaching out, the curriculum might be better named "Answering your Children's Religious Questions," as it sounds more accessible.) In addition to current church members, individuals who attend this class could become some of the first members of the new children's religious education committee. This committee could then plan the new religious education program for today's families. By including parents with concerns related to religious education, the new program is more likely to be relevant to contemporary family life.

An important caveat to observe when planning for a ministry focus to reach out to potential members is not to plan "for them" when you are not one of them or may not know much about their interests, culture, or lifestyle. As outreach effort is very important, be sure to have a few people knowledgeable about, or from, the ministry focus group on the planning committee for the programming. It is also important to set up accountability relationships, especially when working with communities of color and other historically marginalized groups. For more information on developing accountability relationships, go to UUA.org, Leaders' Library, and search "Accountability Relationships."* To learn more about becoming an ally in the work toward anti-oppression, go to UUA.org, Leaders' Library, and search "JUUST change."* For more information about how accountability and ally relationships, and ministry focus groups in general, fit into the context of the Unitarian Universalist membership journey, please see The Membership Journey at UUA.org, Leaders' Library, and search "Membership Journey." *

As with any new effort, it is important to take time afterward to evaluate. What worked well? What might need to be done differently? What can we learn from this? A congregation then might be ready to reach out in another way to another group. Marketing experts would call this segmented marketing. We can also say that it is sharing the ministry more broadly to others who need our saving message. What we have is too good to keep to ourselves. We can be more intentional, building on what we do well to invite many more to join us at our table. Is there a place set for them?

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***Important note for searching UUA.org:** All UUA resources mentioned are available in the Leaders section of the web site, in the Leaders' Library. Please use quotes around the title when you search to bring up the resource or item you seek.

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