

The many ways of getting together

Pantheist



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The downfall of Meetup?

Meetup, the web-organized contacts group that leads to face-to-face meetings, was the engine of Howard

Dean's meteoric rise and was working very well for the WPM. Now it seems to be in serious trouble, and there are questions about how useful it is going to be in helping people form local groups.

Pantheist Meetup was growing very rapidly indeed early last year at 10 per cent per month. Increasing numbers of people were managing to get meetups to happen and it seemed set to become our best way yet of forming local groups.

Then Meetup changed its system. It shifted away from the original automated self-regulated system, where a meeting happened as long as enough people said they were going to turn up. The position of "Organizer" was created, which the first person to volunteer could commandeer. The organizer decided whether and when to have meetings. If you didn't have an organizer, you didn't get a Meetup.

Pantheist enrolments slowed from 50 a month to ten or less, perhaps due to the withdrawal of Meetup's advertising with Google for all its many topics. This slowdown seems to have affected many or most topic groups. On top of that it is now harder to make a Meetup happen. From April organizers have had to pay a monthly fee of \$9 per month for the privilege. This is scheduled to go up to \$19 a month - a hefty \$228 per year. Organizers with large ongoing groups were able to recoup the fees from people attending the meetups. But the high fees have created an impassable hurdle for new and small groups, as many pantheist groups are. Many organizers in many topics have quit.

Underlying all these shifts was the fact that Meetup never found a working business model. Their first approach - making money from cafes, bookshops and other recommended venues - did not produce the goods. Meetup tried to fill the gaps with a premium service, Meetup Plus, but that did not suffice. It's highly uncertain whether their new business model will work either.

It's all very sad for grassroots-driven political campaigns, and also for people like us. Alternatives are planned, like the open-source CivicSpace, but they are not up and running yet. Political campaigns are developing their own in-house alternatives. Got ideas for us? Post them in the Community list.

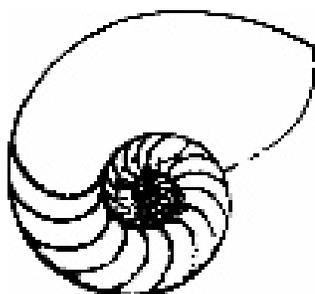
Using the UU path

One of the most promising avenues for the next few years appears to be Unitarian Universalist congregations. Unitarian Universalism is a spiritual organization without a creed, that has attracted atheists, humanists, pantheists, pagans and liberal theists. The most recent large scale survey of over 8,000 Unitarian Universalists in 1998 found that 46% described themselves as Humanists and 19% as Earth or Nature-centered. The World Pantheist Movement neatly spans these two, which between them account for two thirds of Unitarian Universalists. Christian, Jewish and generic theists made up only 24% combined. There are over 1000 UU churches in the USA, within reach of most larger towns.

The WPM has many members who also belong to UU congregations, including some ministers and congregation board members. We affiliated with the Unitarian Universalist Association two years ago - for \$100 a year we can now sponsor one event each year at the annual general assembly. In 2004 at Long Beach we ran a stall. This year at Fort Worth Paul Harrison gave two lectures on Using Nature as a Focus for Spirituality to large and enthusiastic audiences. A number of members have given pantheist services. Some of them give several each year. Some have groups that meet on a regular or occasional basis.

We will give every possible assistance to anyone who is interested in pursuing the UU avenue to local pantheist group formation. We now have a special section of the WPM website for UU resources, flagged from our front page (top right.) There you will find material on how UUism and the WPM relate, how to form and run a local group in a congregation, and also a growing collection of UU sermons and services given by members, some of them complete with choices of songs and readings. You can request copies of our color leaflets and print out copies of our trifold leaflet on World Pantheism and Unitarian Universalism.

We also have a yahoo group for UU pantheists, currently with 90 members. This is aimed at UUs who are interested in forming pantheist/nature-reverence groups in UU congregations, as well as at pantheists who are interested in checking out Unitarian Universalism with a view to local group formation



Do-it-yourself with the WPM

We shall continue to explore other ways of encouraging and facilitating local groups. One approach is to use the members' data center (<http://members.pantheism.net>) to search for members with reach of you - you can search by city, zip code and area code, and you can use wildcards (eg ^91 would return all members with zips starting with 91, ^818 would return all members with phone area code 818). You get to see their city and their email and can create an email list. Another is to use our local WPM yahoo groups - a full list is available at <http://www.pantheism.net/localgroups.htm>. There are lists for most US states, for UK/Eire, Australia and Canada. UK and Southern California pans have successfully used their yahoogroups to organize get-togethers large and small for many years now.