

**We Are: A VOLUNTARY COMMUNITY!**

Volunteering is good for Heart, Mind & Soul and the Church!

We are a voluntary community. No threat of hell or guilt from another keeps us here. We are here because we have chosen to be a part of this community and this movement. When we give our allegiance to this congregation, it is out of our free will and choice which can be rescinded at any time. This is not a birth-rite tradition for though we have a few lifelong UUs, even they must choose each year to remain a part of this community. There might be some financial advantages if we could count on everyone born UU to tithe and support our church and movement, but we have never been that kind of religion. None of the Universalist thinkers, going back to the earliest days of Christianity believed in an everlasting hell for anyone, it just isn't something a loving God would allow. The Unitarians might at times have had more of a threat upon their offspring, because what Unitarian could imagine their children joining a group less prominent than the Unitarians, from whose ranks came many of the founders and early Presidents of the Republic.

Today it is neither threats of hell nor social ostracism, nor promises of heaven that swell our ranks. We each have made a choice to be here and we each choose regularly to remain. But we are not a large or affluent congregation. We do not have funds to pay a large staff, so we are also asked to regularly volunteer to take on leadership roles and various tasks that maintain and sustain the church. We volunteer our commitment to just be part of this organization, but the work of the church requires more: that we regularly commit time in service to the work of the church both mundane and sacred.

Volunteerism has a long tradition in the United States generally. There have been important non-profit organizations, as well as churches, which have depended on the unpaid service of countless generations of Americans. Many civic organizations would not exist without the

volunteered service of supportive individuals. Scouting programs and children's sports organizations are good examples, but most civic orchestras and many community theater groups also depend on volunteer efforts. In earlier times, barn-raising were community efforts and the only pay might be a good meal, probably pot-luck! It is in our national DNA to volunteer, and in recent years schools have begun to require some kind of community service for high school students.

Churches have always depended on volunteer efforts. In the earliest days of Christianity, even leaders were not paid but supported themselves through other efforts. Over the last few centuries a professional clergy developed, but as recently as early in the last century the pay might have consisted mostly of free housing and a somewhat erratic variety of foodstuffs such as live chicken or turkeys. Even today, clergy may be the only paid leaders of a congregation, with all other efforts provided by volunteers or volunteers assisted by a few part-time staff members.

Without going into the pros or cons, many congregations have survived for years without any professional leaders, but never without a cadre of volunteers. Churches are probably the organizations most dependent upon volunteers because week in and week out churches operate throughout the year. Church buildings may sometimes sit vacant much of the week, but they will be busy on Sundays and there more likely will be a full calendar of meetings of church volunteers and others who are providing a variety of services to the church and the broader community. Even though we are a small congregation with old facilities, our building rarely goes more than a day or two without some meeting or event. We are blessed by having an office administrator who coordinates the calendar, but just imagine where we would be without Syd and Rosemary and Harry and Mary and the many other folks who wear many volunteer hats to help with the church.

I'm not going to name everyone who volunteers around the church, but I do want to thank you all for your efforts. You are the lifeblood of this congregation, and without you we could not survive let alone thrive.

In a small congregation such as this, the demands on volunteers are many. There often isn't someone else who can take over when we get tired of doing one volunteer task and so it is easy to see how volunteers in small churches can get burned out after a few years. In modern times with all household adults usually working full-time, more of the responsibility falls to retired people who may already have been volunteering all their adult lives. When finances allow, some previously volunteer positions may be shifted to part-time staff members but often finances don't allow much of this and still it is hard for churches which have been accustomed to offering a lot of services presided over by an array of committees to cut back on expectations and choose a few priority areas in which to offer ministries.

Last spring we started a Program Council bringing together leaders from the programmatic ministry areas of the church: worship, religious education, social justice, and so forth. This group has become an important touch point for planning and coordinating programs and may become the source of new ideas as well as the group that decides when to let some things go if they take too much energy or fail to draw enough volunteers and participants. Since many of the church committees have few members beyond the designated chairperson, the Program Council may be the only group that can really assess whether new programs should start or older ones continue. Of course, even the Program Council has its challenges for it adds another meeting in most months. Hopefully the Program Council as well as the committees provide an opportunity for members to connect with each other and share their stories through starting with a check-in and giving time for people to talk with each other, but they are also business meetings, so this doesn't always happen. People don't generally come to church just to serve on committees, so in our professional and volunteer efforts we need to prioritize opportunities for people to share their stories and connect with others at a deeper level than they experience in the rest of their lives.

Now of course, volunteer leaders of adult classes and groups, children's religious educators, and facilitators of small groups such as covenant

groups are instrumental in helping people to connect and go deeper. Sometimes this can happen in committee and team meetings, but often it does not. That means that we need willing volunteers to staff such programs even beyond all the committee members and chairs that fill out the rest of the pantheon of committees. UU congregations often seem to have an inordinately large number of committees, but lots of churches have more committees than they need. It is easy to start a new committee, but have you ever tried to kill a committee? Somehow committees take on a life of their own that self-perpetuates, whether for good or ill! Perhaps we will take a look at the committees sometime down the road, whether they still serve a needed function, but far be it from me to tell you a committee ought to be disbanded—I only plan to be here another 10 years or so before I retire!

Now think with me for a few moments about the benefits of volunteering. We all know the benefits to the church, but what do we each get from our time as volunteers? Most of us have experienced a level of fulfillment, a soul-satisfying internal response when we have done something that benefits others. We have done good and we know it. We often make our internalized parents happy to know we have made the effort to support worthy causes, to have done the volunteer work required to sustain treasured organizations and values. It just feels good to be part of something larger than ourselves. Especially if we are not able to provide as much financial support as we would like or as the church or organization needs, we can feel that we are doing our part by volunteering, by doing the work of the organization.

There are plenty of reasons to volunteer and lots of opportunities, but the reason I think is the most important of all is to sustain and build up a free and accepting religious community that welcomes a variety of beliefs and appreciates individuals without regard to age, shade of skin, gender or orientation. There are some liberal churches and some other liberal religious and philosophical communities, but Unitarian Universalism offers a unique combination of welcoming and accepting so many people. We may not be perfect, but I know of no other tradition

that does as well at including people and respecting their uniqueness. Even for a small group, we are rather impressive in what we have to offer! Our continued existence as a congregation and as a movement requires that we always have a large pool of hardworking volunteers. Even if we had the money to hire more staff, we would still need the volunteer efforts of all our members to remain a vital organization. There is just no substitute for what you all do to make this church alive.

I have never felt like I was good enough at remembering to send thank you notes for gifts or service, so I hope that you will think of this service as a big thank you to all those who serve the First UU Church of Stockton! I thought about making a huge Thank You Volunteers banner to hang down from the organ loft but I ran out of time to get it ready! I also was thinking about asking for a group of volunteers to plan a service or dinner to thank volunteers at the end of the year, but somehow it seemed a little strange. If anyone would like to work on that, though, talk to me later!

We are a voluntary community in a nation of volunteers. We are a small community in a nation of organizations which is needing more volunteers when hours available for volunteering is continuing to decrease for most families. We are competing for scarce volunteer hours against schools, sports programs, relief organizations, food kitchens, and thousands of other groups who rely on volunteers. We ask a lot of our volunteers and we are not always efficient in our operations. We spend a lot of time talking about what we are going to do and considerably less time actually doing it. Younger adults and families often prefer volunteering at individual events like trail or beach clean-ups rather than serving for years on committees, readily agreeing to one-day projects but declining ongoing commitments.

Unfortunately, churches have a harder time scheduling one-time events and tend to have so many committees that willing volunteers often find themselves on multiple committees, task forces, teams, and councils! We may need to rethink how we use volunteers if we want to keep our

volunteers healthy and happy. Perhaps we will need to look at the size, scope, and duration of committees. If there are tasks that can be grouped together perhaps we can combine the efforts of some groups. We also need to provide more training opportunities for leaders because church leadership often requires different skills than those of business, teaching, or social services. We can undoubtedly do more and better, but it will take planning, commitment, and training; oh yes, and we will need more volunteers!

We are a voluntary community of free individuals! May it always be so!  
Amen.