

THE MEANING OF UU MEMBERSHIP

We have recognized a new group of members this morning. These people who have joined the official membership over the course of the last year or so are already making a difference and reshaping this congregation. Their reasons for joining may vary, but each has found something of value offered by this community. We celebrate with them as they add their ideas, hopes, and dreams to all that we are here at 1st Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton, California. As part of our celebration of their decision to become members, we take time this morning to think about the meaning of membership. We also have a group of newcomers who have not decided (at least not yet) to become members but have become strong supportive friends of 1st UU, and we also welcome and appreciate them.

Several years ago now, the UUA Commission on Appraisal spent 4 years researching the meanings of membership within UU Congregations. In the following quotes I will be sharing extensively from the introduction and first section of their 2001 Report: *Belonging, The Meaning of Membership*.

What is the meaning of membership, or more thoroughly, what are the meanings of membership? What is it that people seek when they affiliate with our congregations? What is it that congregations owe to their membership, and members owe to their congregation? Whom do we include as members of congregations? These are the questions that came to the UUA Commission on Appraisal, prompting their 2001 report, *Belonging*.

Why do people join in religious communities? Rev. John Buehrens, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association from 1993 to 2001, noted how central such communities are to the quest for a meaningful life: “To be human is to be religious. To be religious is to make connections. To lead a meaningful life among the many competing forces of the twenty-first century, each of us needs support in making meaningful re-connections to the best in our global heritage, the best in others, and the best in ourselves.”

Participants in focus groups for the COA report were asked to talk about what membership in a Unitarian Universalist congregation meant to each of them. Mark, a relatively new member of his congregation talked about moving into the area from the other side of the country and feeling the need for community... Mark and his wife were looking for a place to engage in meaning making. After joining a local congregation, they found much more. They have joined the choir, taken part in social action projects, assisted with the auction, and facilitated one of the Caring Circles. “As we go forward, we may find it difficult to schedule any additional projects, at least until after the new year. And this is a problem that everyone should have; not enough time to spend with loving, caring people who respect each other, thrive on diversity, and wish the best for the ones with whom they share.”

Making connections is the essence of the religious experience. Many people in the focus groups talked about the yearning for community, for friends, for fellowship. Dee had been a self-described solo practitioner of an earth-based religion, but the solitary pursuit left her feeling spiritually empty: “Since becoming a member, I feel more community spirit. There’s a great sense of camaraderie among members and friends of this small church, and there are many chances to become involved. I now feel like I belong to a spiritual network. . . . By working, worshipping, or just plain having fun with others, I get a sense that there’s more to religion than just rules and regulations to obediently follow.”

The connections that people seek when looking for a religious home are both internal and external. While becoming connected in a “spiritual network” within the congregation is essential, committed membership also means getting connected to the larger community. A healthy congregation will understand its mission to be outward-looking as well as internally focused. In another focus group conducted by Rev. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, people active on the membership committee of a large and well-established Unitarian Universalist congregation identified several primary reasons why people stay with their congregation: to be connected to a worshipping community, to feel spiritually grounded (meaning making and internal connections), the congregation’s strength in living out its principles and providing opportunities to do social justice work in a structured way (external connections), religious growth and

learning—in other words opportunities to “bring their dreams to life” and to share both information and skills with others.

...the most important reason why people become members of our congregations is the need for growth and transformation. Theologian James Luther Adams reminds us that for practitioners of liberal religion, “revelation is continuous.” Throughout our lives we humans are learning, growing, changing creatures. Using both reason and intuition, we spend our lives seeking to enlarge our understanding of ourselves and others and the world around us. The possibility of growth and change, of transformation, is the real basis for participation in a religious community. We have all experienced losses and disappointments, pain and grief. We have been broken by life and need healing. The closest that contemporary Unitarian Universalists may come to a concept of salvation is to offer opportunities for growth and transformation, for becoming more whole. As one of the great ministers of the past century, Rev. A. Powell Davies, memorably put it, “Life is just a chance to grow a soul.”

NOT CONVERSION BUT RATHER, COMING HOME

...most of those joining our congregations speak less of an experience of conversion than of confirmation: “This is what I always was, but I didn’t realize there were others like me, who felt the same way.” Something like this statement is made repeatedly in any gathering of newcomers to one of our congregations. The term *come-outer* referred to the fact that all these people had come out of other congregations and faith traditions. But a closer listening to their stories reveals that most did not, in fact, come out of a Baptist or Presbyterian or Catholic church one day and into one of ours. Rather, in between was some period of time, usually years, in which they lived, as we say, unchurched. Some call this in-between period “nothing.” One might also call it secularism. Whatever its name, it is that “nothing” or “secularism” from which they actually came out, or as some now say, came in. If pressed to answer why, most refer to a feeling that “something was missing” in their lives. This common story has been supplemented in the past decade or so by another slightly different variation, told by those who grew up truly unchurched. They were not raised in even the vaguest institutional religious environment. Their story is different in that it lacks any referent to past church experience, whether embittered or nostalgic or something in between. *Church* is for them a more or

less blank slate. Their presence at our doors speaks perhaps to the indelibly religious element in our human nature, and almost certainly to the search for “spirituality,” however vaguely defined, which is omnipresent in the current era.

Membership as Process

...membership is a process. Though there are organizational and institutional needs to define membership cleanly and precisely, the process of membership is in reality a gradual progression from lesser to greater commitment, which neither begins nor ends at the point of formal joining. Thus, for both the individual and the institution the meaning of membership changes over time. Both are continually in process. But it is neither a smooth nor entirely predictable process. *Community* is a happy-sounding word, and it is common for religious liberals to emphasize the ideal of community as a primary reason and purpose for the institution of the church. Such idealism has its place, but building an authentic human community is never easy and only fleetingly happy. The broad appeal of the word itself is suggested by Lyle Schaller’s observation that, “the word *community* has now surpassed the word *first* when choosing the name for a new congregation. . . . In one way or another, nearly every congregation on the North American continent today boasts about the feeling of community the members enjoy. The dream of some is that placing that magical word in the name will both reinforce the sense of community and also attract those seeking a supportive community of believers.” But magic cannot create the warm fuzzy ideal that most people associate with community. Real community can only be built through hard and unglamorous work. Like any effective relationship, it requires commitment. Often these days we hear people say they are seeking a “spiritual community” but want nothing to do with “organized religion.” By the former they seem to mean a place that will meet their own religious needs; the latter they seem to associate with a place that will make demands upon them to support the institution’s needs. The reality is that you cannot have one without the other, and part of the church’s job is to lead people to the discovery of the spiritual truth that it is only by giving that we receive, giving not only our money but ourselves. In other words, only by making a commitment to a community can we hope to build a community. And this commitment consists not of lofty idealisms but of practical realities.

Henry Nelson Wieman, a Unitarian and process theologian, wrote of religion and faith as being not simply ultimate concern but ultimate commitment. Inevitably in our lives we commit ourselves to something, whether worthy or not. The direction and intensity of our loyalties give shape and meaning to our lives. Loyalties, commitments, covenants, the promises we make to one another: These are the things that relate to the deepest meanings of membership. They tell us what we belong to. And by doing that they tell us who we are.

We have made some assumptions about what brings people to our congregations and what invites a significant membership commitment. From these assumptions we can also identify the characteristics of a congregation that will best meet those needs and elicit that commitment. First of all, a healthy congregation will provide worship services and other programs that encourage the search for meaning. Our UUA Statement of Principles and Purposes calls for our congregations to be places where this search can take place: “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote . . . acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations; a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. . . .” The local congregation can be envisioned as a laboratory where people bring their life experiences, responses, feelings, hopes, and dreams. The great experiment is to put all of that together in a form that creates meaning, gives definition to each person, and allows each person to expand his/her perspective and to continually seek and occasionally find transformation.

Our congregations need to be places where connections can be made, networks that connect people to each other in meaningful ways....People seek out a congregation because they need a place to belong—to be rooted, to work out questions of value and meaning, to have a spiritual life. The congregation that understands its purpose in terms of offering people a place to grow and change and to make connections will also be a congregation that understands itself to be an organic entity that also grows and experiences transformation. George K. Beach asserts, “People do not ‘join’ a covenanted community; rather they constitute it; there is no ‘it’ without them and each time new folks join, the whole is literally reconstituted.” A member of a local congregation opined that

he understood membership in terms of how strongly one can influence the destiny of the group. If people enter into the membership experience with the expectation that change will be the result, the structure of our congregations needs to be one that allows for flexibility and change. If in fact we understand the congregation to be reconstituted with the addition of each new member, then it can be no other way. Every person brings a different set of experiences and expectations and ways of doing things to the mix. The result will always be different, surprising, and vital.

A vital, growing, changing congregation is bound to look outward as well as inward. In addition to supporting the spiritual growth and deepening faith of individual members, it will always be asking the question about how it fits into the larger community. By words and deeds that are visible and audible, a healthy congregation shows people what Unitarian Universalism is at its best. You might say that this is the most powerful form of evangelism: demonstrating the possibilities that liberal religion offers simply by being the way we are in the world.

I hope that these extensive quotes from the Commission on Appraisal report *Belonging* have been helpful. Just a thought or two in closing:

I remember growing up in a United Methodist Church that provided a broad and supportive sense of community and worked for justice. My adolescent experience of confirmation class encouraged me to continue in my search for truth and meaning in a way that epitomized my exploration of both science and metaphysics which continued through my University experience and led me to enter seminary. Questions of truth, meaning and spirituality continued throughout my United Methodist Ministry and led me to study with Matthew Fox and eventually to seek credentials as a Unitarian Universalist Minister. My quest for meaning continues through every sermon I write, every idea I explore. My need for community is addressed by my continuing engagement in ministry and the life of this congregation. I still have more questions than answers, more hopes and dreams than energy to carry them out, and I do more enjoy the discussion about heaven and the universe than I really expect to get there! I have enjoyed this life and will continue to enjoy whatever time I have left, hopefully always in the company of interesting companions, such as yourselves! I welcome our new members and wish them and each of you interesting travels on your journey of life and faith!

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!