

VOLUNTEER APPRECIATION & DEDICATION

First of all, Thank You! Thank You, volunteers for doing all the things that keep this church running; for serving as Ushers, Greeters, Worship Associates, Guest Speakers, Religious Educators, Childcare workers, setup and takedown people; for serving on committees and the board and for leading programs and making copies, and helping out in thousands of ways that nobody else even knows about! Thank You for all that you each do for this church, for each other, and for Unitarian Universalism.

We each may have many different reasons for supporting this particular congregation. We may have belonged to several Unitarian Universalist Congregations before moving here, or we may have only known this congregation. For whatever reasons we became involved here, we all support and work for this congregation because we believe in what it stands for, what it means to the community, what it means to us!

Like every religious community and most non-profit organizations, we are almost entirely dependent on the volunteer service and financial contributions of our members and friends. These are the gifts returned to this community and movement for what it has meant to us to be members and friends and what we offer to other members and friends.

We do not hold out a threat of hell, nor a promise of heaven to anyone. What we offer is a grounded and accepting community, a belief in the goodness and continuing progress of humanity even during difficult times, and a commitment to accept and encourage all who come into our community as genuine seekers of a healthier way of living. We encourage members and friends to be their authentic selves here when we gather, recognizing that none of us is perfect but that each of us is a valuable and worthy part of this community.

We generally agree on the Principles and Sources of Unitarian Universalism, and out of that shared understanding we recognize our responsibility to work to strengthen and support our religious community. It takes an effort by all our members and friends to keep our congregation strong and vital. Our volunteer effort within our congregation is vital to the life of the community, but our volunteer efforts do not end there. We also rely on volunteers to spread the good word about Unitarian Universalism, to invite those we meet to join us, and to work for education, justice and human rights along with others in the broader community.

Within our congregation we rely on volunteers to lead and assist in religious education programs for children, youth, and adults. We rely on volunteers to coordinate and cooperate in providing meals and program leadership for our UU Thursdays program. On Sunday mornings, we rely on volunteer greeters, ushers, worship associates, hospitality hosts, choir members, and often other musicians. On the Board, Program Council, and all the Committees, we are entirely dependent on the work of many willing and committed volunteers. During the week, many unseen hands make sure the buildings and grounds are cared for and ready for whatever programs or services may be scheduled. Churches, and especially smaller churches virtually define what it is to be a voluntary organization!

This is the work that you accomplish when you volunteer at First Unitarian Universalist Church. You bring the church to life! Though it is not language all UUs are comfortable with, you each witness to your faith by your work supporting this congregation and your works of justice and compassion out in the broader community. This is no small matter, and those of us who are paid to work here could not keep things going without your help! So Thank You, each and every one of you for the things you do, as well as the gifts that you give your church!

Today we briefly recognize the work of our volunteers and Dedicate them for the tasks they will accomplish in this year, but the work of volunteers in this congregation is never done. There is always more that needs doing, or should be done, or could be done to strengthen this congregation and Unitarian Universalism in Stockton.

There will always be opportunities for those who wish to serve this congregation and the movement. That is not to say however, that our committed volunteers need to do more, for there are some that give many hours and days each week to the work of this congregation. Interestingly, those who are the most generous supporters financially are also usually the most committed volunteers. Many of our leaders give as generously of their time as they do of their treasures. Again, we are thankful for both gifts and service!

What do volunteers get for all their efforts? The best way to find out is to ask them! Who would like to share some of what you get back for all your efforts?

I expect most of us realize that those who are most active help to shape the mission and vision of the congregation. They also get the satisfaction of serving a community in which they can believe. To help others and to do good works leave us feeling satisfied (probably releases endorphins or something), satisfied that we have made a difference for the congregation and the people we serve! We will not likely solve all the problems of the world in our lifetimes, but maybe by strengthening this congregation we can make a difference in our community which will make the world a little bit better!

When the world was simpler, it was easier to volunteer. Churches relied on stay at home moms to accomplish most of the work that needed doing. Today there are few stay at home moms or dads, so we depend much more on people who have retired, but retired UUs just get busy with other things and aren't often available to help around the church. This has required congregations to have more staff members to accomplish a lot that was once done by volunteers. Computers have also helped to keep things organized and to make it easier to contact people and get information out to people!

I certainly don't miss cutting stencils for the mimeograph or typing and fixing dittos, but some of the newsletter folding parties were fun and great sources of information!

In any case, I have watched churches change dramatically over the time I have been involved in ministry. The number of volunteer hours to keep a church going has probably decreased a bit, mostly from necessity, but the need for volunteers to support and staff most of what congregations accomplish has not changed that much. It is rare for UU congregations to hire ministers of outreach either for recruiting or doing social justice work, these are roles most often handled by volunteers with the help of the minister. Many smaller congregations only have a minister and a part-time secretary, with even more of the work done by volunteers. We are fortunate to have an Office Administrator and a Director of Religious Education as well as a Music Director and a paid pianist, even if those roles are all less than full-time. Having a committed staff does so much to strengthen the church, but we will never run out of things for volunteers to do!

Anyone who would like to get more involved can just let me know and we will find things that will fit any temperament or skill level! There is no end to the opportunities! We are working on a training day for ushers, greeters, and hospitality hosts, so let us know if you would like to volunteer in those roles. As the Board and Program Council get going for this church year, we will have new tasks and new groups needing volunteers!

We have each gained much from the church and we each have a responsibility to give back to the church so that the church can continue to minister to new generations of people. Unitarian Universalist congregations particularly have something unique to offer that can't be found anywhere else. Because we have no creed, doctrine, or dogma, we can welcome in people of good will from every religious tradition along with those who struggle with the notion of any deity having a role in the universe. In our kitchen, atheists and agnostics work alongside pagans, Buddhists, and Christians, and we all call ourselves Unitarian Universalists! Anyone who respects the beliefs of others is welcome to make this place a home! And in this home, there are chores that need doing! Newcomers are welcome to rest a while, especially if their journey here has been long and hard, but there is work for everyone who is ready, willing and able! It is by all of our efforts that this congregation grows strong and maintains its vitality! Thank You, Volunteers, and thank you all who will be volunteering this year! Amen!