

Resources for Communities of Ongoing Religious Exploration

V. 2 Unit 2

Membership

Suggested Chalice Lighting

Here, today, in this place and with these people,
May we listen so that we can hear;
May we hear so that we can feel;
May we feel so that we can know; and
May we know so that we can change ourselves and this world.
May this chalice we light,
Light our Way.

Erik Walker Wikstrom

I. Introduction

Unitarians and Universalists trace our life in North America to the arrival of the Europeans known as “Puritans” or “Pilgrims.” Though the line of descendancy is clear and unbroken, and we continue to hold the fundamental spiritual principles of that 17th century movement, UU ways of being in religious community could hardly be more different.

For a community in which theology and government are essentially inseparable, it would make sense that membership was described in equally spiritual and administrative terms. In the liberal religious context, where theological ideas are always open to challenge and change, UUs still comprise fellowships and churches that are legal entities with bylaws and rules of governance. The living congregation is both a corporate entity and a spiritual being.

This has created an ambiguity in the meaning of the word “membership” within our tradition. In 2001, the UUA Commission on Appraisal culminated several years of study and collaboration around this issue with a report entitled “Belonging” Its 168 pages are full of important insights and observations, prompted in large part by this consideration:

The definition of membership in most of our congregations has focused on the secular/corporate meaning of congregation—voting rights, financial support, eligibility to serve as a trustee or represent the congregation at General Assembly—and de-emphasized the religious/ communal dimension, the focus of which is the constituency of the “covenanted body of worshippers.” Should not this emphasis be somehow reversed? (*Belonging*, p. 8)

II. CONNECT: Readings

For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

*Paul's Letter to the Romans,
12:4-8*

Church-members may not remove or depart from the church, and so one from another as they please, nor without just and weighty cause but ought to live and dwell together: forasmuch as they are commanded, not to forsake the assembling of themselves together. Such departure tends to the dissolution and ruin of the body: as the pulling of stones, and pieces of timber from the building, and members from the natural body, tend to the destruction of the whole.

Cambridge Platform of 1648

Our congregation is the place where we promise—and then live out that promise—to explore robustly and practice faithfully what it means to be alive. Joining a congregation is making that promise. It is saying to the community: I join with you in living this partnership. I am committed. It affirms your experience of our Unitarian Universalist good news—that all are worthy of love and belonging, and that we are all connected—all life is one.

Joining this congregation asks to be held accountable by the community, to being your best self. And it invites you to hold us accountable too. Joining acknowledges and honors our living history, empowers your claim to the gifts of our Unitarian Universalist tradition, and enables you as a creator of our shared future, and honors the ways we are already changed by our relationship.

Foothills Unitarian Church, Fort Collins, Colorado <http://foothillsuu.org/>

in becoming members of our meetings we are taking great risks. We are, in essence, pledging spiritual intimacy. We are promising to let others know us in ways that could be uncomfortable at best, and downright painful in some instances... Of course, it is possible to join a meeting without making such a frightening commitment. But we do so at the peril of having the relationship remain superficial, or ultimately crumble, since lack of spiritual intimacy creates the same kind of barriers in meetings that lack of emotional and physical intimacy creates in marriages.

In fact, it is not far-fetched to suggest that joining a meeting is very much like entering into a connubial relationship... When viewed in this light, membership is not something conferred upon one person by an already extant group of "others" but a covenant among individuals to become something new; an agreement to change the shape and definition of the meeting by admitting yet another minister into the sacred circle.

Renee-Noelle Felice, *'Marrying' the Meeting*, Friends Journal, April 1995

The church is a human institution and it can become all-too-human. When such difficulties arise some walk away, others step back. But fortunately there are also those who remain steadfast through these times of disillusionment, whose loyalty grows beyond it. They are not better or worse than the others, just different. Out of their disillusionment grows a loyalty less to the institution and more to the values and ideals that the institution seeks to serve and embody. It recognizes that institutional as well as personal failure is virtually inevitable. This is loyalty of a high order. It requires extraordinary patience, tolerance, and the capacity to forgive. These are spiritual gifts, learned in real community.

Those who have gained these capacities, these gifts, are in the deepest sense members: people who are committed for the long haul, those who have a loyalty not just to what the church is but what it could be, what it can become through their persistence and with their assistance. They are committed in other words, not so much to the institution as to the values and ideals it exists to promote and uphold—even in its periods of failure to do so.

UUA Commission on Appraisal, *Belonging*

III. GROW: Questions for consideration and discussion

1. These are widely varied understanding views of membership. They cover some of the dominant views, but certainly not every way of thinking of membership in a UU congregation. How would you describe the meaning of membership, for you?
2. Some leaders observe a failure in UU congregations in defining and communicating a distinct "UU identity." Do you think that is true? How is your understanding of membership related to your sense of UU identity? Is membership tied solely to the congregation, or does it imply or incorporate participation in a larger covenant?
3. In its conclusion, the Commission on Appraisal recommended that congregations consider implementing different paths or types of membership -- separating the voting-eligible status from an expression of spiritual commitment or a sense of belonging. Would this be helpful? What might it look like?

4. Borrowing from Bonhoeffer and other theologians, the Commission suggested that a deep and lasting sense of membership takes hold only after an experience of disillusionment with the body; until that inevitable experience, it is more aptly viewed as infatuation. Those who value their ideal of community, above the community itself, will leave as soon as conflict arises. Does that ring true for you?

IV. SERVE: Taking it home

Consider the bodies and organizations of which you are a member, whether formally or informally. Family, employment, school class or alumni/ae group, political party, city and county, etc. as well as expressly voluntary associations like clubs and congregations. Which of these is important to your sense of who you are? Which of these represents principles and ideas that guide your actions and decisions in some way?

Consider how you are participating in each of these, on a regular basis. Are you investing your financial contributions, your time, your energies in the affiliations that most strongly represent your personal values? Do you experience these as bodies in which you are an active part, with a voice and presence that helps shape the character of the body? When these organizations fall short of your expectations, do you take the time (and the risk) of expressing this in a way that could be constructive, both to you and to the larger entity?

V. Conclusion

Was the discussion interesting? Or did it get bogged down or off track? How might you have approached the topic differently?

What surprised you about the perspectives revealed in discussion? Did it help you expand your understanding? Did it help you know the other members of the group better?

Were there moments in which you felt uncomfortable? Confused? Anxious? Affirmed? Eager? Hopeful? Surprised? What other feelings did you encounter?

If people in the group would like, allow them to share these things, without interrogation or challenge.

Suggested closing words:

As we extinguish the flame, may its light lead us back again from our separate lives, And guide our way forward into a season of promise and renewal.