

# The Meaning of Membership

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First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

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My introduction to Unitarian Universalism was at North Shore Unitarian Church in Deerfield, Illinois. The first time I attended I was greeted at the door by a woman named Bobbie, who gave me a call later that week. I think the service was a lay-led service on love around Valentine's Day with lots of music and readings. The service didn't particularly impress me, but I had already heard enough about the church to have the feeling I was in the right place. And it didn't take long at all before I felt I had found my home.

I came because I had reached a point in my life where I wanted to find a church again. I had grown up Methodist and Presbyterian, but already in high school I was going my own way theologically, and felt the Christian language to be too limiting. I became an atheist, got a degree in philosophy and figured I was on my own because I thought all churches were Christian. But by my early thirties I was looking for spiritual inspiration and was willing to go to a church to find it. I started at the local Presbyterian church and the people were extremely friendly, but I felt I had to translate the sermon from its Christocentric language. A friend at work told me about the Unitarian church, and by the time I went, I had the feeling it would be right for me.

I cried through a number of services at first. Soon after I started attending, there was a New UU class. It met for four Sundays after the service, and by the end of the class, those of us who took it were ready to sign the book. It felt like such a privilege!

I became a member and threw myself into the life of the church. I worked the art fair and the rummage sale and washed windows on the spring cleaning day. I was elected chair of the General Program Committee and served on the Program Council. I had to decide whether to sing in the choir or to teach RE, and as much as I like to sing, I chose to teach because I wanted to get to know the kids. I started with 5<sup>th</sup> grade, then became a youth advisor after one of the youth asked me to take them to a Con. Cons are youth-led gatherings on a district level of high school youth, and I ended up going to many in the Central Midwest District. I still sang in the Christmas Eve choir and in the Pledge Drive musical. I also developed a spiritual practice, starting with a book I got at the church book store. I bought a little ceramic chalice at the church art fair.

If you've joined this or another UU congregation, what was your experience of joining like? If you haven't joined, why not?

Or you might as why join? Why be a member when you can attend all the services you want anyway, you can serve on committees—or teams as we're calling them now—make a pledge and pay on it, teach RE or sing in the choir, wash windows on the work day, and do just about anything you might want to do here. You can be quite involved as a friend of the congregation.

So what does membership get you? You can vote at congregational meetings, serve on the board, get the UU World. Those are not small things. The UU World is the only magazine I have read cover-to-cover every issue I have ever received since I became a member in 1994. It has great articles on interesting topics as well as UU news. The privilege of voting at congregational meetings and serving on the board provides an opportunity to live out our fifth principle – democratic process in our congregations and in society at large – in a way that really

feels it matters. We can take responsibility for an organization that conveys our values into the world, and that can be empowering.

But beyond the perks of membership, so to speak, the real benefit is that in becoming a member of this congregation, you become a part of something much larger. You are no longer just attending your local UU congregation, you are a Unitarian Universalist, with associations and commitments and a sense of yourself both humbled and enlarged by your greater connection. We UU's are a small but strong body, together working to make the world a better place. Joining this congregation is a dedication to the principles of Unitarian Universalism, and the commitment to helping make a better world through our institution that we create together.

And we do create it, together. By what we bring to it—our time, our talent, and our treasure – we make it happen. Without members, we simply wouldn't exist.

Still, there is a tradition that we are joining, and we can be uplifted by knowing that our community is extended in time as well as in space. We have a long, respectable history, and it is up to us to keep that memory alive. Indeed, what else is a religious tradition but the stories it passes on throughout the generations, throughout the centuries?

We can be proud to be members of a tradition, a faith, that includes people like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. We can be proud to be included in the ranks of people like John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Kurt Vonnegut, Clara Barton and Louisa May Alcott, John Dewey and Florence Nightingale, Charles Darwin and Alexander Graham Bell, Susan B. Anthony and Julia Ward Howe, Christopher Reeves and Paul Newman, Martha Fergner and Jens Wennberg, and more. We can be proud to be the descendants of the original faith of the founders of Massachusetts, the Pilgrims and the Puritans, who were protesting not so much the theology of the Church of England, but the polity. They came seeking religious freedom not from a particular theological view, but from the way the church was organized. We carry on their heritage today by our firm belief in the right of conscience and the use of democratic process.

We can be proud to be the descendants of a faith that rejected a concept of hell, believing in a universe that is not based on punishment. We can be proud to be the descendants of a faith that rejected a concept of original sin, believing that humans are born innocent and innately good, even though they can go astray. Our faith, on both the Unitarian and the Universalist sides, has upheld the value of individual conscience in religious matters, so that we have never been dogmatic and told people what they had to believe.

At the same time, Unitarians and Universalists and UU's haven't been given nothing to believe. It's not a philosophical debating society about what others believe. We have a good and true religion of our own, and we need to own it. It's fine to look beyond our roots for inspiration, but let's not forget our roots in the process.

We have a religion that offers great hope for the world. It is a positive religion, believing in the goodness of humanity and of the universe. We believe that we have the power as human beings to make the changes the world needs so that everyone can live in peace, with justice, and with their basic material needs met. Our faith offers us great hope because we believe it is in our power. It is up to us to do the work to build the world we envision. We can honor that hope by acting to realize it in ways great and small. We can honor that hope by bringing more people into our faith, because there is strength in numbers, and we need a great deal of strength to deal with the issues our nation, the world and the earth are facing today.

As members, we pledge our loyalty to this religious movement, this faith we call Unitarian Universalism. We pledge to add our portion, great or small, to this church community

and through it to serve the world. Membership is about commitment. In joining this Church and through it, the larger faith of Unitarian Universalism, we are committing to give what we can of our time, talent and treasure.

As in any relationship, a commitment is a big deal. It is not something to be taken lightly. Sure, the bylaws only require that you've signed the membership book, but there's really more to it than that. It is a good idea to understand what it is you're joining, to know at least something of our history and our polity and our principles. It's a good idea to understand our Unitarian Universalist faith – its heritage and structure. It's also a good idea to understand what is expected of members.

The first expectation is to attend services regularly. Be an active participant by attending services or working with the Religious Education program.

Another is to work on your spiritual development. There are many avenues, starting with reading, reflecting, and becoming more observant of yourself, others, and the natural world. Participate in Adult Religious Education forums or classes, work on lay-led services, share in a men's or women's group. Help people in need through the social justice program. Spiritual growth is a life-long endeavor that is up to each individual, with the support of the congregation.

Members also serve the congregation by giving their time and talents. Working together on the many tasks needed to run our congregation, small or large, is the best way to get to know others. As time allows, choose activities in which you can put your talents and interests to work and that you will find most rewarding. Even relatively simple tasks, such as hospitality on Sunday mornings, are important because they foster community.

You are encouraged to participate in the democratic process. Attend congregational meetings, get informed, and exercise your right to vote.

Members are expected to pledge at a stewardship level. Giving financially, as one is able, is crucial to the health of the congregation and its ability to serve its members and the community at large. If you have not already made a pledge, the pledge form is in your order of service.

And finally, connect to the wider UU movement. Read the UU *World magazine*, attend a conference or workshop with other UU's in the region, attend a UU camp, or go to our national General Assembly. The regional Assembly is coming up on April 1<sup>st</sup> and it's in Syracuse. This year we will elect a new president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and there will be a candidates forum at the regional event. It's 9-3:30 on a Saturday; I recommend it highly. You can hear Dick Gilbert give the Gould Lecture on "Singing Our 'Broken Hallelujahs' - The Prophetic Imperative in a Messy World," among other inspiring presentations. Let's pack the May Memorial church with UU's from Ithaca! And if you want to get really jazzed about our faith, come with me to New Orleans the third week of June for General Assembly. You can elect the new president of the UUA, participate in the governance of our denomination and attend lots of fantastic workshops.

Ultimately your involvement is what is expected; that you care about this congregation and the larger movement, and are willing to help to the best of your ability to ensure its success as a religious institution making a difference in the world, for the world. Commit to it with the seriousness that you would in committing to a spouse in marriage.

And commitment or loyalty isn't a one-way street. We derive as much benefit through our commitment as does that to which we are committed. When we commit to the congregation, it certainly helps the congregation, but it helps us as well. A true commitment can change us, it

can transform us in ways we cannot foresee in advance. We are no longer consumers, purchasing a product and hoping to at least get our money's worth. When we make a commitment, whether to another person or to an institution like this congregation, we understand that we are not simply receiving something, but we are helping to make it happen. We are active participants, and if something is wrong with the relationship, it is up to us to do something about it. The easy way out is to leave, of course, and plenty of marital and congregational conflict is never resolved because people take the easy way out. But commitment means hanging in there, even when it's difficult, and using healthy communication to work through issues.

Membership in a Unitarian Universalist congregation fundamentally means consciously choosing to enter into covenant with other members. We are a covenantal community, not a creedal one. We covenant as a congregation to affirm and promote the seven UU principles:

- 1 the inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- 2 justice, equity and compassion;
- 3 acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth;
- 4 the free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- 5 the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process;
- 6 the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; and
- 7 respect for the interdependent web of existence.

We also covenant with each other in this congregation, a covenant that has been implicit but that we are making explicit. We have been creating this covenant together for about a year now, and hope to make it official in April. In the latest draft, we covenant to:

Be together in community, guided by love and respect.

Be open, friendly, and welcoming to all.

Be engaged in congregational life.

Communicate compassionately, directly, and honestly.

Listen deeply and kindly to each other.

Believe in others' best intentions.

Support and inspire each other's quest for truth and meaning

Acknowledge, respect, and value our differences.

Work to serve our community's shared goals.

The discipline and commitment of being present on Sundays and involved in the community make a difference. One of the lessons I keep learning is that spiritual joy comes from helping others. In the reading, Rev. Safford asks the man who shows up every Sunday, "Why do you come, John?" He felt he had important work to do in his church on Sunday mornings. "He greeted people as they came, and steered them toward the minister, the coffee pot, the Sunday School, the guest book, the pledge cards, the sign-up sheets, because he felt it was the right and only thing to do. When people come into your home, you welcome them as if nothing in that moment matters more. He worked hard on Sunday mornings, he got up on Sundays expecting to work hard to make others feel at home; he came with that in mind."

Hospitality, welcoming others into our church home, is one of the most important ministries we can do. It's something we can all do, even the shyest of us. Our hospitality teams have official greeters, but that doesn't mean we can or should leave the greeting to them. Once you've been here a little while, you can tell who the new people are, and you can make them feel at home in your church home, just like you would in your own home.

And if you engage in a ministry of hospitality, or any of the other many ministries we do

here, and show up regularly and display a commitment to this institution, you will indeed be missed when you are gone. Your presence here matters. It matters to the rest of us, and it matters to you. This is how we can honor the memory and hope of the religious movement we pledge our loyalty to. This is the meaning of membership in the great institution of the First Unitarian Society of Ithaca.