

“The Meaning of Membership in Free Religion”

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 UU Congregation in Reston
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Why do we have this process known as membership in Unitarian Universalist churches, or in churches of any denomination, for that matter? What is the meaning of membership in this free faith organized by congregational polity? How do we live out our commitment to membership? This service will include a ceremony welcoming new members to this congregation.

Story: “More is More”

Joshua Searle-White

(A Story about a house that is flourishing because of the spirit of love that pervades the activities and the people living in the house.)

Sermon

Has anyone been in a house like the one in the story we heard about in the story? Think about a house that welcomed you. Whose house was it? Maybe it wasn't a house, but a group of people, who helped you move, or who took care of you when you were sick. Maybe the house you are thinking about is THIS house, this church building, this group of people. Whether you are an old-timer here, or relative newcomer, perhaps this church is on your list of welcoming places.

Being part of a house --- a group --- matters. Think about how we want to be together during high as well as low times in our lives. Don't we plan parties to celebrate milestones? Don't we come together for support in times of sadness? During this time of interim ministry in your congregation, don't you find it helpful to be here with one another, sharing this time of change and transitioning?

Someone who would like the house in the story is the sociologist Robert Putnam. Putnam studies religious communities. In studying how people come together, Putnam is concerned about a trend toward social isolation that he refers to as 'Bowling Alone.' Putnam suggests that it's much more fun to bowl on a team than to bowl alone.

I know about the value of bowling together. Some of the teams that I am part of are in music and dance. I regularly attend contra dances and English County dances, as you will see in our service on April 6. It is great fun, and one of my spiritual practices. Dancing always helps re-align my soul, and it builds community. I meet folks dancing I would otherwise have no occasion to interact with. I need them: it would be impossible to do a contra-dance all by oneself.

Sadly, reported Putnam, people aren't connected like they used to be. We're busy, so many responsibilities, that devotion to community falls by the wayside. We may be expert multi-taskers, but that's not community. Email and facebook conversations also do not a community make. True community requires looking into others eyes, hearing their voices, feeling their hearts. Many busy people are actually very lonely. It is hard to comprehend the isolation that many people live in.

Creating Community through religion

Being connected with others is a fundamental human drive. In fact, connections are core to the meaning of religion. Remember that the root of the word religion is ‘re-ligio,’ being re-bound. We find important community through religion. The religious drive is universal, across time and centuries. Through religion, we ask the ‘big’ questions of life: about living and dying, existence, truth, beauty, and more. Being together in religious communities, we connect with people around the world.

While big religious questions may be universal, answers are usually explored best in particular communities with other people of similar cultural orientation. Thus, religious denominations have evolved, grounded in common theological and social norms. And then, within denominations, congregations are organized, each with individual, more local identities. It is important to know the identity of the denomination and the particular congregation we join: how would you explain the identity of Unitarian Universalism and this congregation?

In order to join a religious group --- or any other cultural group --- we have created this process we call ‘membership’ Membership is central to any religious organization, on many levels. That is, there are many meanings to membership in a congregation. Today, on this day when we welcome new members, I want to explore some of membership’s meaning. Today, let us consider in particular how membership in a liberal religion asks much of us in the way of personal responsibility: in some ways, it is risky to join a UU congregation because our covenant of membership asks us to be responsible members.

Membership: Central to Religious Identity

How any religious denomination defines its terms of membership is central to its identity. (repeat) Unitarian Universalism is no different. In this free religion governed by congregational polity each congregation defines its own membership process. What defines the qualifications for membership is not commitment to a creed, but instead commitment to a covenant: a promise about how to live together in relationship. ‘Deeds, not creeds’ is our motto. A religion united by deeds requires that each of us commit to personal responsibility for keeping covenants and for volunteering our stewardship to keep our congregation working well.

About ten years ago the UUA Commission on Appraisal produced a report called *The Meaning of Membership*. This report said that membership is at the heart of congregational life. How we understand membership is core to how we understand free faith. Everyone has a responsibility to understand the meaning of membership. Further, it is the responsibility of professional and lay leadership to offer membership classes from time to time, as we did on March 8. I urge anyone whether you are a visitor or a long-term member, to take this class next time we offer it. It is the responsibility of every member to remain current with the conditions for membership in their own congregation.

Theology

The Commission on Appraisal explained membership in Unitarian Universalism from two theological perspectives: internal and external. The first, the internal, is explained through relational theologies such as the theology of Henry Nelson Wieman, who described the ‘holy’ as

‘creative interchange.’ That is, the sacred is found in the creative connections we have with one another and the natural world.

Admittedly, there is some paradox in the notion of a network of free people---you’ve probably heard folks joke that getting UUs together can be like herding cats. We might say that to participate in religion in a free way, you really don’t need to join anything. If you want to be free, why join a congregation? But if you didn’t join, you’d miss the relational part of the holy that Wieman is talking about. Membership in a congregation and a denomination doesn’t diminish freedom. It enhances freedom. Furthermore, free faith doesn’t mean that you can believe or do anything you want. There are guidelines and boundaries, defined by each congregation, that sustain a relational identity. For instance, a member can’t engage in actions that harm themselves and others. And members are encouraged to follow certain guidelines for financial stewardship.

In addition to being inward, membership has an outward perspective, towards the community, as expressed in liberation theology. That is, commitment to free faith means work in the world. According to liberation theology, we experience the holy through helping others. We should spread the good news of free religion into today’s world that so desperately needs this good news. Thus, the meaning of membership in free religion is both internal and external.

Reasons for coming to church

So let me ask, why do you go to church? Why do you want to be part of any religious community, and why this liberal religious community? Why have you committed to membership, or why are you considering membership in the future? What meaning does membership hold for you? What meaning does dedication to this community mean?

Our reasons for seeking religious groups are diverse and deeply personal, and probably include some mix of internal and external explanations. We in this room represent many reasons for being here. You may be part of the growing trend of church-goers, especially among younger folks, who want to grow spiritually. That spiritual search may include simply a place to get away from the hectic grind for one hour, or a place to bring cares and concerns. Or, you may be looking for a place to expand your knowledge, grow your mind. You may be looking for a place to educate your children. Some of you may be here to teach. Some of you probably come here for friendships. Some of you come to church because it is easier to do social justice with others than alone. Some of you come because of the opportunities to give and practice leadership. I don’t know if there are any statistics about how many people use church as a dating service, but certainly some find life partners at church.

We have many reasons for coming to church. For me one of the beauties of liberal faith is the wide palette of options, as we each pursue truth in our own way. Regardless of your personal reasons, what I hope is that we all share a bottom line that says each time you come together here, you experience transformation: for yourself and this community. I hope you leave this place a little or a lot different than when you arrived. Coming together in community sheds light on this process called life, an important consequence of not ‘bowling alone.’

Responsibilities in coming to church

Membership includes responsibility. How can we be responsible members?

For starters, it is important to remember that membership is a process. It is not one single act of signing a book and paying a pledge. Instead, it is an organic, ongoing process of relationship with a congregation. The Commission on Appraisal explained this relationship as having three stages. First, **we identify** with a particular congregation---that is, when we first visit we find something that resonates, most likely on some intuitive level. Second, **we affiliate** with that congregation, usually through education such as our Pathways to Membership class to understand the organization more. Finally, **we commit** through signing a book and make a financial pledge. This commitment to membership yields privileges, such as the right to vote in congregational decisions. It's important to give these three stages enough time. One should not sign the book on the very first visit to a congregation. On the other hand, there should be some progress. We hope that a visitor who keeps coming back will eventually choose membership.

Even after these three stages --- identifying, affiliating, and committing --- the growing process isn't over. In some ways, becoming a member is just the beginning of a new phase of ever-deepening commitment to personal growth, the congregation, the denomination. That is, reaching membership doesn't mean the search for answers to life's persistent questions --- that the radio detective Guy Noire is constantly searching for --- is over. Membership asks of us ongoing searching, because, darn it all, the answers just keep changing. The meaning of membership lies in willingness to keep asking questions, not in finding answers.

Yes, there is the technical act of signing the book that defines membership. But there is also the long-term part, to become a vital part of the community. The community part, based on the relationships we create through shared ministry, matters so much more. Vital engagement in this life of the community is where we find the transformation.

What does intentional membership mean to you?

What does membership in this congregation mean to you? How do you live out your covenant of membership, symbolized by your signing the book? If you are a friend of this congregation, what other covenants have you made?

For example, do you attend regularly on Sunday morning as much as life allows regularity these days? Do you come on Sunday regardless of the theme of the service or who the service leaders are? Do you believe that your presence here matters? The meaning of membership includes not just what we get out of church, but what we contribute by being here. If you were not here today, this would be a different congregation. Do you have a sense of commitment to others as part of your reason to be here on Sunday mornings?

Membership also invites us to be present at other church activities, as our lives allow. I hope everyone is involved in at least one activity outside of Sunday worship. Our free congregations are what James Luther Adams called 'voluntary associations.' That is, they would not exist without the shared ministry of each person in the community. On the other hand, there is a flip side to this question. Are you also aware of boundaries, to avoid that old demon, Burn Out? Knowing how to say 'no' when you need to is another important meaning of membership.

Commitment to a religious community also includes the responsibility to be aware of what's going on in the community: to know about the latest activities and discussions. That is, congregational commitment includes communication: to read the congregation newsletter online or in print, to check and reply to email, to read announcement sheets and posters around the building, etc. Communication is one of the important meanings of membership because it means engagement. Responsibility for communication is especially important during this period of interim ministry, a time when we don't do things in the same old way.

Do you know the identity, the history? ... of this congregation, of this denomination? When you are here at any activity, are you really present? A Buddhist would ask if you are totally mindful? Do you check agitations of the daily grind at the door, to be open to those moments of transformation that just might come along as you are here in community?

Of course there are the many tangible meanings to membership. Becoming a member gives one voting privileges in this congregation. Membership offers access to rites of passages: child dedications, wedding, memorials, and more. Membership makes one eligible for the honor of serving elected offices in the congregation. Membership means that you can say that you are part of a religious movement that holds such potential to do good in the world. Membership is not only a signature in a book, it is an ongoing process of exploration, service, and transformation.

Closing

Let's go back to that warm and welcoming house in our story. Think about what you would be missing if a house like that in your life had not been there and you had ended up bowling alone. Think about how different your life would have been without that house.

In that difference between no house and a welcoming house lie the many Meanings of Membership.

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