

The Meaning of Membership  
A sermon by Rev. Frieda Gillespie  
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Let's start by asking this question: What is the most important reason that people become members of a UU church?

"In [a] focus group conducted by Rev. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, people in a membership committee of a large and well-established Unitarian Universalist congregation identified several primary reasons why people stay with their congregation: 1. to be connected to a worshipping community, 2. to feel spiritually grounded 3. the congregation's strength in living out its spiritual growth and learning—in other words opportunities to "bring their dreams to life" and to share both information and skills with others."

A church functions in two distinct spheres that are not necessarily identified as such. One sphere is the "worshipping body" – the people who come here on any given day for worship, and we all belong to this whether we sign a membership book or not. The other sphere is a corporate/secular institution and membership there means voting rights, financial support, and eligibility to serve on the Board or vote as a proxy for the congregation at General Assembly. These two spheres while historically recognized as separate in days past are nowadays blended into one. They blend together in the myriad tasks and responsibilities members take on in support of maintaining the church and growing the church.

I'd venture to say that belonging to a spiritual community is high on everyone's list of reasons to join this church. And I imagine that you might be expecting to be presented today with a picture of community that is beautiful, effortless, and eternal. That touches only the best in each person and ignites their minds and hearts into higher purpose. If you have found that community please let me know and we can all go there. But, the catch is if we do, we will be bringing ourselves along with us. As Confucius said, "No matter where you go, there you are."

How do we create that spiritual community and keep creating it as the membership fluctuates almost constantly over the life of the church. People move

away, get upset and go away, or die, and new people come and stay for varying lengths of time. The personality of the congregation shifts as soon as someone new gets involved. In the midst of all this change, we speak of and lift up the idea of community. Our ideals of community are often unrealistic at best and sometimes seem like lofty dreams. As soon as there are conflicts or problems those with the strongest idealism declare, "Who needs this?" and leave. No one stays for the long haul who can't love the community more than their idea of community. The famous theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote, "Only that fellowship which faces...Disillusionment, with all its unhappy and ugly aspects, begins to be what it should be in God's sight, begins to grasp in faith the promise that is given to it. The sooner this shock of disillusionment comes to an individual and to a community the better for both." Bonhoeffer saw the concept of an ideal community as a hindrance to the development of a real and genuine community.

It begins with authenticity—the courage to be ourselves. It begins to mean something when compassion or empathy overrules our prejudices and reactions. And it begins to be truly spiritual when we allow ourselves to change, to let our outworn behaviors and ideas be challenged and transformed into greater wholeness. Nothing about this is easy but the rewards ...for those who do this work are great.

Those who can love the mission and direction the church points to more than fulfilling their personal dream, will be steadfast in their support and membership in the church. To be committed to a church requires a loyalty of a very high order. It requires extraordinary patience, tolerance, and the capacity to forgive. Someone said of this, "These are spiritual gifts, learned in real community." So, we could say that it's not in spite of our failings that we are loyal but because of them, because we want the great gift of transformation. And when we really see this we become members of a different sort, we begin to be loyal to what the church could be—the values it strives to uphold even when it fails.

Perhaps we can also see from this that membership in a church is a process rather than an event. We may sign the book any step of the way, but we grow into membership as we grow in understanding the purpose, the covenant and the work of the church and allow it to challenge us.

The defining difference between a Unitarian Universalist Church and all others is that it is covenantal rather than creedal. Many if not all of you came here or joined and stayed because you are not required to subscribe to a creed. You can articulate your own beliefs and some of you do. We tend though to emphasize the lack of proscribed creed rather than the covenant we subscribe to. A covenant is an agreement between two or more parties. The UUA commissioned a study of membership in UU Churches and published a , “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.”

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This congregation does not have a completed written covenant. It was started over year ago and put aside to be taken up now as part of the transition work the church is engaged in. There is a beautiful affirmation that was written years ago and is recited every Sunday. It certainly contains the values this church upholds.

The Commission on Appraisal found “for many people, the experience of fellowship, of connection to other people, was the single most important factor in evaluating the meaning of their membership. Interpersonal relationships make going to church a more significant experience.”

What makes our relationships here meaningful in a way that a social group may not be? It has to do with intentional sharing and listening to each other that leads to integration of the experiences of the other into our thoughts and feelings and into our lives. Through this process we are creatively transformed and our actions in all spheres of our life reflect that transformation.

“Being together in a meaningful way is profoundly important, but it is not sufficient reason for the existence of the liberal church. If membership were based only on face-to-face relationships, the church would lose its power to act as an agent of transformation.”

Liberation theology teaches that lived experience rather than established authorities is the source of wisdom. Thus it is accessible to everyone, not just the highly educated or wealthy. Theology is the reflection on the experiences of our lives. It is always a hopeful theology in that there is a vision of a preferred future that guides our actions leading to that future. It is always a justice-seeking

theology which makes it a theology that grows out of the lived experiences of the poor and oppressed. Understanding the lives of those in circumstances that limit their opportunities for a good and healthy life creates compassion and ignites a desire to create social change.

The Commission postulates that through this theological understanding of the importance of each person's experiences we can welcome our congregations to "a variety of people who might otherwise find us puzzling or inaccessible."

There are so many people who have shut the door on the possibility that any church would accept them as they are and would have anything in common with them. Churches appear irrelevant at best and small-minded and bigoted at worst. To reach those 'unchurched' people who would love this church and this faith were they to know what it is – a faith based on reason; a faith that not just tolerates but honors diversity and individuality—we would have to demonstrate with our actions that we are different, that we are striving together to create a community that includes them, supports them and stands with them in seeking justice.

Years ago, I was an intern the UU church in Framingham MA. That year three 13 year olds were brought to church for the first time one of which was my daughter, Tealeesha with severe behavioral problems and two boys with autism, one of whom was Ben who is now my stepson. There was an immediate need for help with these three kids all of whom had special needs. I had all but decided to keep my daughter away from church, she was quite a problem child when my supervisor, the Senior Minister, sat down with me and said, "Don't leave her at home, we have to do better than this." And she suggested that I preach about Tealeesha and her issues. I did and I included Ben and Alex the two boys as well. I didn't know what to expect but after the service 12 people asked me if they could help. They got together with me and we formed a group to act as 'buddies' for each of the kids. It became known as the BRE committee which stood for the basic principle we were working from, namely, "belonging is a religious experience." So, that even though they weren't able to participate in the way typical kids would, being recognized by others as part of the community was a religious experience for them and also for those who did the recognizing. That experience was transformative for those who gave their time to these young

people and particularly for Ben as it opened up the possibility of a connection with others far beyond anyone's expectations.

It took courage for those folks at the Framingham church to step forward to include the three challenging kids but they all grew as a result. The strength of their response I think spoke to their hunger to connect with and serve others in a meaningful way.

Every church has both explicit and implicit covenants. The implicit covenants are how the church really acts and the hidden assumptions behind those actions. "We've always done it that way," is a good example of an implicit assumption. These covenants are invisible to those of you who've been here a long time because they are taken for granted as 'the way things are.' The implicit covenants are the protectors of the status quo and are the biggest barriers to change. Uncovering those assumptions and re-thinking them is the important work of this transition time. Everything we do from the music we sing, the way we conduct ourselves in worship, the way Religious Education classes are taught, even the signage on the property says something about you. It's really something to notice and think about and maybe ask visitors about.

Wherever you are on your membership journey at First Universalist Church, I hope you will take to heart the words of William Arthur Ward, "Do more than belong: participate. Do more than care: help. Do more than believe: practice. Do more than be fair: be kind. Do more than forgive: forget. Do more than dream: work." For this the path to the beloved community that you seek.

May it be so.