

The Meaning of Membership in a Unitarian Universalist Congregation

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[The Unitarian Church in Summit](#)

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Suppose sometime next spring you're sitting in a room with fellow members and friends of this congregation with a candidate for this church's ministry. Each of you has had a chance to ask a question. You like her answers, her forthright manner, her evident commitment to the Unitarian Universalist cause. Then, just as forthrightly, she has her turn to ask you. Now she wants to find out about us! And asks, "What's your picture of a vital, strong Unitarian Universalist church? And for that picture to come true, what commitments would the members need to make?"

You may want to give the impression of having cerebrated such questions in advance, so this is your chance to begin -- quietly, to yourself -- composing your answers: Hmm. "My idea of a vital, strong UU church is ... (you fill in the blank). To make that ideal image come true, we want members to be committed to ... (you fill in the blank)."

The Rev. Barbara Wells, one of the younger generation of our ministers (well, relative to me, that's a very large category), became the new-start minister of the UU Church of Woodinville, Wash., a few years ago. This is how she describes the "Path to Membership" in her congregation:

"Becoming a member of the Unitarian Universalist congregation is an important step in a person's life. How the church encourages, enables, and celebrates a person's journey says a lot about the church's own commitment to our religious tradition. Throughout our history, Unitarian Universalists have prided themselves on being a 'free faith.' No creed or dogma will exclude members of the human family from our midst. [But] at times we have taken freedom to mean lack of commitment, and people who wished to join our congregations merely 'signed the book' without understanding what membership is all about. Too often [our] churches have been unclear what commitment to membership means, and have been unable to give fellow journeyers maps to lead them into a deeper relationship with the church. ..."

Now let me tell you how she went about being clear -- clear as a bell, in Woodinville -- about "what commitment to membership means." (To be sure, she had a big advantage, being in her new-start congregation: No history to fight, just write it on a clean slate. Nor any accumulated endowments or real estate, either!) She said she tells new people, right up front, that membership is a covenant (a shared commitment) that entails six personal responsibilities:

1. Attend regularly.
2. Serve on a task group or a program-focused group.
3. Work on your own spirituality.
4. Do social service (that is, walk the talk).
5. Pledge at a stewardship level (defined as 4 percent of income -- ouch!).
6. Be involved in the larger UU movement.

It's the kind of list that, like a hanging, as I think Mark Twain said, "concentrates the mind." But who would join, we ask, if we adopted something like that? I'll tell you: committed people. If Unitarian Universalism is growing today, it is precisely because of these intentionally planned, new-start congregations like Woodinville. And because we ended the illusion that the lower the demands you make, the more you'll grow.

Barbara Wells does lighten it up a bit by adding that these six items can be taken in cycles; everyone is not doing all of them all the time. And of course it's on the honor system. Nobody goes around with a six-item list, checking up. Regarding that stewardship item, Barbara suggests the slogan: "Give until it feels good." But she notes that "feeling good" will never mean "not having to give up anything in order to give at this level." Feeling good does not mean protecting our own wallets; it means being generous because we see ourselves as generous people, people who are not just looking out for "Numero Uno." I suggest simply, straightforwardly asking ourselves, "What will I have to give up to make this gift?"

Barbara Wells goes on to say: "Unitarian Universalism is a positive and transformative faith. We believe that becoming a part of a Unitarian Universalist church is an important step in a person's life journey."

Do we believe that? And is this true for you, personally? Whether you are a new member, a long-time member, or just thinking about membership, ask yourself: Do you find, among us, "a positive and transformative faith"? Three big, heavy words make it not a question easily or lightly to be answered. We need to be dealing with these big words here.

Take the word "faith": To me, "faith" is a bedrock confidence in life's meaningfulness, a conviction of heart and mind that engages my will, that calls forth my commitment, that energizes and renews and sometimes even rescues my life. Faith is not "believing that" such-and-such is true; it is "believing in" -- putting my trust and confidence in that which sustains me.

Take the word "transformative." We've heard it before. David Bumbaugh also used the language of "transformation," did he not? At least I assume that he had a hand in writing the words we print in each issue of our News & Views newsletter: "The business of the Church is transformation: the transformation of individual lives, of the community, of the world. ... We invite you to consider the opportunities for ministry which this church offers you. ... In ministry to others, you will find the path to your own spiritual growth."

This sounds like what's called a "symbiotic" relationship. By ministering to the needs of others, my own deepest need -- to be a giver, to serve ends larger than myself -- is being ministered to. It's a kind of transaction, a giving in order to receive, and receiving so we can give. And when it happens (and I believe it does happen again and again in the beloved community of the church), well, that's the kind of transformative moment we're talking about.

But how do we multiply that? How do we become what I call "the transforming church" - a church that (a) transforms people and communities, and (b) is itself in a continuous process of transformation?

So, a positive and ... wait a minute, what about that word "positive"? It does not go without saying, not when many of us know with greater clarity what we do not believe in than what we do. And too often get stuck reiterating our negations, rather than calling up our affirmations. Then we sit around and (a) exclaim over the foolish things the fundamentalists believe, while (b) we lament that we don't have the security of firm beliefs the way they do. Just here, we are ripe for a little "transformation."

May I tell you what I positively believe in?

I feel we are called, and enabled, constantly to get "unstuck" and surpass ourselves: I believe in the presence of transcendence.

I feel there is something of infinite worth in each person I meet, and even myself: I believe in the creative freedom of the human spirit.

I feel best about myself when I'm looking to others' needs, and acting with no other motive than kindness: I believe in the transforming power of love.

Often I feel empowered, and often I feel humbled, by my communities. They are many, but among them, one stands for the very idea of community -- the church: I believe in the dedicated community of all souls.

That's my credo. You can write your own: *This is what I feel is really important, and therefore this is what I believe in. Put my trust in.*

I also believe we must enlarge the way we think of ourselves, if the church is to be more than a club where you are required, at most, to pay your dues. I'll never forget the elderly woman I visited a few years ago in a retirement home. I'd seen her there from time to time over a period of years, but then one day she called the church office to have her name removed from membership and the mailing list itself. I was appalled. I went for a visit and asked her, "Why did you do that?" "Well," she said, "since I couldn't come anymore, I decided you shouldn't waste your postage on me. I'm not really a member of that group anymore." "That group"! Try as I would, I could not convince her that the church is not a club or an activity, but a holy commonwealth -- a spiritual home within which our spiritual identities are nurtured and formed and sometimes transformed. Please

note: Money was *not* her problem; her loss of any sense of inclusion in a spiritual community was the problem. She was saying: "I'm not worth bothering with anymore." I don't know which troubled me more: the feeling that she was selling the church short, or the feeling that she was selling herself short. We all need a little transformation sometimes.

There are other, more inspiring examples. Meta Black, who is 104 and not bragging about it, told me just the other day that she believes in ... laughter. She knows exactly what she means by this, and how she learned it (at home), and how therapeutic to our spirits it is. There is no question about Meta being rooted here, and present to us even at this moment -- as we also are present to her -- in spite of the separations of days and miles.

In the liberal church, we have no way of threatening or coercing anyone, nor would we want a way to coerce, because that would contradict our very being and intent. William Ellery Channing spoke of the church as the place of "perfect spiritual freedom." Our task follows directly therefrom: to form a "more perfect union," a community of more perfect spiritual freedom. A transforming church will draw people to itself by the attractiveness of what it is. Its power is only that of attraction, something that people see, and that leads them to say, "I want to be a part of that." And what will they see, if among us they see a transforming church?

- (1) They will see a people among whom joyful, spirited things happen on Sunday mornings, or whenever the community gathers and celebrates its faith.
- (2) They will see a people personally engaged, in many varying ways, in the quest for spiritual growth, and helping one another and their children in their quests.
- (3) They will see a people committed to serving the fundamental needs of humanity, working together to build a universal community of compassion, dignity, beauty and peace.
- (4) They will see a people knit together, a place where everybody takes part and pulls together, a place where the people say: We take full responsibility for the governance and for the sustenance of this church community.

A transforming church is a celebrating community, a learning community, a justice-seeking community and a self-sustaining community -- a dynamic, four-dimensional reality. Therefore, to be a member means doing these things, in your own way, in your own best understanding, with your own time and talents.

Suppose each of us did what Bernard Loomer did when he joined the Unitarian Universalist Church in Berkeley, Calif., a few years ago. Suppose each of us wrote our own "Church is" statement. Wouldn't that be wonderful? Of course, he had a head start. He was a theology professor -- although he became a Unitarian Universalist only when he retired and moved from Chicago to the Bay Area. He was a big, warm, shaggy guy --

though I didn't know him well, I could see why so many of my colleagues, who had studied with him, held him in such high esteem. That was a few years ago; now he's, well, gone to his UU reward, the great discussion group in the sky. Seriously, when my old friend Dick Boeke circulated it, I found Bernie Loomer's words both touching and deeply meaningful. Talk about "positive" -- he concluded:

"Church is the communal celebration of our elemental joys and sorrows, of our gains and losses, of great meanings. Church is for taking these elemental qualities and values of everyday life and weaving them into the very liturgy of the community. We are grateful for this kind of church. We are proud to be included in its membership."

What we (and any Unitarian Universalist congregation) need to do, I believe, is to lay out more clearly our "path to membership," which is also a path to personal self-discovery and friendship. In a transforming church, membership means these things: Being present -- participating in the worship and other common celebrations of the community. Therefore, be here regularly.

Being on a path -- seeking to grow spiritually and helping others, including our children, in their quests. Therefore, seek out and follow your path.

Working for a more just and caring world -- individually and cooperatively, among ourselves and with others. Therefore, live a principled life.

And taking up the responsibilities of building and sustaining the institution that lets these good things happen, the church community itself. Therefore, give generously of your gifts, your talents and your leadership.

In a colonial city in Mexico, on the plaza in front of the ancient church, a priest, on his way into the church for Sunday Mass, passes the gathering of men lounging and chatting, as always, all morning long. Usually he says nothing, but this day the priest stops and speaks sharply: "Are you men Catholics?" One replies, "But of course, Padre, but we're not fanatics."

We are not looking for fanatics, but only for men and women who would be more fully and authentically what they are. We humans are not simply what we are, static and unchangeable. We are what we cannot not be, and affirming that, what we choose to become. Within that dynamic lies the whole mystery of human life: We are truly free only as we seek to fulfill the imperatives of our being.

We prize freedom. We also know that there are always disciplines that come with freedom. Whoever undertakes to create something of worth, in any field of endeavor, understands this. It takes persistent, hard work to create something -- for instance, a church community. The effort also promises the discovery of something we did not and could not see before. We are a "pilgrim church, on adventure."

To be a member of a Unitarian Universalist congregation finally means to have a part in this mysterious and wonderful process -- creating a community of more perfect spiritual freedom.