

The Meaning of Membership

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As I say on many Sundays at the beginning of the service: we are here on the west side of town. Here is where we chose to be this morning. And most of us here have chosen to become members. And today, we have affirmed the most recent among us who have made the choice of membership.

What does it mean to say that we are ‘members’ of this congregation?

One thing we are affirming by our membership is that we **belong** here. For humans, belonging is the opposite of loneliness. Belonging is the **opposite** of loneliness. As humans, we **need** to belong. To ourselves, to one another, to our friends and families, to our faith, to our culture and country, to our world. Belonging is primal and fundamental to our sense of happiness and well-being as humans.

Our interests, motivation, health and happiness are closely tied to the feeling that we are members of a greater community that shares common care and common aspirations. A community that shares love and shares hopes.

Most of us belong to a few different communities of shared care and aspiration, hope and love. So, what does it mean to be a member here, at the Second Unitarian Church of Omaha? And perhaps more important:

What it is that **keeps** us as members of this religious community?

This very question – was taken on by the U_U_A_’s Commission on Appraisal a few years ago. The Commission on Appraisal takes on big, juicy questions of our faith and studies them in a number of ways. They hold focus groups, they interview people, they study other faiths, they study our UU history and theology. They used all of these approaches in their report on the meaning of membership.

Here is their report on what it means to be a member of a Unitarian Universalist congregation. It is titled *Belonging: The Meaning of Membership*. I have preached from this report before and likely will again, as it contains a richness of insight. I highly recommend this report to our Membership, Fellowship and Stewardship Committees. You can download it from the UUA website as a .pdf.

Among other topics, this report addresses **why** people become members of our congregations, explores **what** membership is and seeks to understand **why** it is that people **remain** members. I’d like to unpack these a bit for our new members and everyone else who is here today, including our visitors.

The main reason why people join our congregations is because of their need for growth and transformation. Growth and transformation of many types: spiritual, personal, skills, learning. This is all about making meaning and applying it in our lives.

That growth and transformation comes from making internal connections as a worshipping community, living out our UU Principles, engaging in the work of Social Justice based on our Principles and our theology, and in coming together to bring our shared dreams to life.

In one interview, the Commission spoke with a woman named Dee, who had been a solo practitioner of an earth-based religion. But who found that the solitary practice left her still feeling spiritually empty. Dee said:

Since becoming a member, I feel more community spirit. There's a great sense of camaraderie among members and friends of this small church, and there are many chances to become involved. I now feel like I belong to a spiritual network. . . . By working, worshipping, or just plain having fun with others, I get a sense that there's more to religion than just rules and regulations to follow obediently.

That “more” is the meaning, the growth and the transformation to be found here.

As the Commission on Appraisal says:

*The possibility of growth and change, of transformation, is the **real** basis for participation in a religious community. We have all experienced losses and disappointments, pain and grief. We have been broken by life and need healing . . . The closest that contemporary Unitarian Universalism comes to a concept of salvation is to offer opportunities for growth and transformation, for becoming more whole. As one of our great ministers of the last century, the Reverend A. Powell Davies, memorably put it, “Life is just a chance to grow a soul.”*

The experience of membership offers to individuals the opportunity to become more whole, more committed to each other and to that which is of ultimate worth, more grounded, more profoundly human, and more aware of the gift of community.

What the Commission says here is that church membership and community goes beyond what we think of as the legal and formal structure of the church. The legal and formal aspects of membership are important. They help to make us ‘church.’ But the **real** church, the reason why we’re here, is about that opportunity to make meaning together, in covenant, as a body of worshippers. The religious and spiritual reasons we’re here are about honor, affirmation, freedom, commitment, salvation, love and care for one another.

Sometimes, we can lose sight of that. But we must not forget.

One of the things that can cause us to lose sight of why we’re here is **disillusionment**. As the Commission on Appraisal found, working through the disillusionment with the failure of our liberal religious communities to live up to their ideals. Working through that disillusionment is actually **necessary** for the deepest loyalty and commitment.

I have seen, over and over and over again, folks come to our churches with starry eyes about the freedom and affirmation and acceptance we offer around religious belief. And that is real and true! They believe, especially if they have experienced deep wounds of faith, that they have found the Promised Land. And, over and over and over, I have watched them have very painful reactions when they find out that in spite of our wonderful approach to faith and spirit. We are no different than any other community in our imperfections. At the moments of disillusion, people often step back or step away altogether – sometimes for good.

As the Commission says:

The congregation that is supposed to be a loving community is sometimes beset with conflicts, The congregation that is supposed to be affirming and gentle can become narrow and unfeeling. Decisions can be made with which we disagree. People can become disagreeable.

Working through that disillusionment, living through it and moving beyond it is the hallmark of committed and loyal members of our congregations. Rather than walking away or stepping back, they remain steadfast. These folks aren't better or worse than others, just different.

Their loyalty is less to the actual church institution itself, but to the values and ideals that the church seeks to serve and live through our Principles and Covenants. Their loyalty recognizes that institutional as well as personal failure is going to happen.

As the Commission on Appraisal notes:

*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, to what it can **become** through their persistence and with their faithful ministry and service. **They are committed not so much to the institution, but to the values and ideals it exists to promote and uphold.***

And it is often **only** through the struggle with disillusionment that people truly become members in this deepest sense.

James Luther Adams, our greatest theologian of the mid-twentieth century, tells this story of a break through disillusionment that brought with it transformation:

*In the First Unitarian Church of Chicago we started a program some of us called "aggressive love" to try to desegregate our Gothic cathedral-like church. We had two members of the Board objecting. Unitarianism has no creed, they said, and we were making desegregation a creed. It was a gentle but firm disagreement and a couple of us kept pressing. "Well, what do you say **is** the purpose of this church?" we asked, and we kept it up until about 1:30 in the morning. We were all worn out, when finally, one of the objecting men made one of the great statements, for my money, in the history of religion. "OK, Jim," he said. "The purpose of this church ...well, the purpose of this church is to get hold of people like me and change them!"*

James Luther Adams is also the person who said: *A living tradition is not bequeathed through some law of inheritance; it must be **earned**, not without dust and heat, and not without humbling grace.*

Yes, there will be dust and heat, but that is the stuff of transformation. Transformation doesn't come without some kind of struggle. Whether it is internal and with yourself or external in the context of relationship.

Being a member here requires a willingness to be disillusioned and disappointed and frustrated at times. Knowing that this is how transformation happens. And being a member requires loyalty to what is highest and best about our faith and about this community. Knowing that we will all fail one another at some point.

In this context I give a charge to our new and renewing members:

Commit yourselves to the life and the purpose of this congregation. Engage with making meaning here and finding your own growth and transformation in community with others. And when you find yourself getting disillusioned in some way. Because you will! Whether that disillusionment is with some folks here, or with how the church operates, or the minister, or with other leaders, or the color of the carpet or our white supremacy.

*When you have these times of disillusionment, I would urge you to reach out and step forward, rather than pulling away. Connect and re-connect with people here. Think about how **you** might be able to participate in the improvement of the thing that is disillusioning. Show mercy. Give grace. Remember our Principles and our purpose and our Covenants. And live them even harder.*

And I have a charge to the rest of the members here, as well:

For heaven's sake, get to know these new and renewing members. Be interested in them and why they're here. Find out about their passions, their gifts and their skills. Love them. Welcome them. And be there for them and for each other when those moments of disillusionment come. And then re-commit to our shared faith. All. Over. Again.

Because that's what it means to be a member here. In this wildly beautiful and somewhat imperfect community. This community of shared meaning and purpose. This community of hope and hopefulness.

Welcome to our new and renewing members. And to all of you, welcome! Over and over again.

Amen and blessed be.