

The Process of Commitment

Why do people join in religious communities? Rev. John Buehrens, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association from 1993 to 2001, notes how central such communities are to the quest for a meaningful life: “To be human is to be religious. To be religious is to make connections. To lead a meaningful life among the many competing forces of the twenty-first century, each of us needs support in making meaningful re-connections to the best in our global heritage, the best in others, and the best in ourselves.”¹

The purpose of this study is to look at the meaning of membership in Unitarian Universalist congregations. Why do people seek out our congregations? Why do they stay? Why do they leave? What about people who grew up in Unitarian Universalist families? Why do they stay? Why do they leave? In order to ensure the health and vitality of our congregations in the twenty-first century, it is important for all of us to consider these questions. We each want a religious home where our own spiritual needs will be met. But we also each need to take a part in creating the kinds of religious communities that attract people who are searching for the same kind of spiritual home we have found—people who have left the religious practices of their childhood, people who grew up unchurched, interfaith couples, and young adults and youth—all of the people who would fill our pews if we would only invite them in.

A study about membership is really a study about evangelism. Not the kind of evangelism that assumes that our religion is better than everybody else’s. Not the kind that impels us to change people’s minds about their faith journeys. Not

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the imposition of one religious view on unwilling potential converts. Healthy evangelism in Unitarian Universalism is simply—or not so simply—the process of building and sustaining healthy congregations that are welcoming and inclusive, congregations that are staffed and planned to meet one of the most basic of human needs—the need to be religious, to seek meaning, to make connections.

In the course of this study, focus groups were convened in the home congregations of several of the commissioners. Participants in these focus groups were asked to talk about what membership in a Unitarian Universalist congregation meant to each of them. One participant was Mark, a relatively new member of his congregation. He talked about moving into the area from the other side of the country and feeling the need for community. It started in his neighborhood, a small cul-de-sac of new houses. He described the feeling of closeness, the willingness to pitch in. But, he said, “There has been little or no spirituality or discussion of spiritual need. The conversation rarely centers on how we feel about our place in the larger community or our relationship to a higher power.” Mark and his wife were looking for a place to engage in meaning making. After joining a local congregation, they found much more. They have joined the choir, taken part in social action projects, assisted with the auction, and facilitated one of the Caring Circles. “As we go forward, we may find it difficult to schedule any additional projects, at least until after the new year. And this is a problem that everyone should have; not enough time to spend with loving, caring people who respect each other, thrive on diversity, and wish the best for the ones with whom they share.”

Making connections is the essence of the religious experience. Many people in the focus groups talked about the yearning for community, for friends, for fellowship. For example, Dee had been a self-described solo practitioner of an earth-based religion, but the solitary pursuit left her feeling spiritually empty: “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 obediently follow.”

The connections that people seek when looking for a religious home are both internal and external. While becoming connected in a “spiritual network” within the congregation is essential, committed membership also means getting connected to the larger community. A healthy congregation will understand its mission to be outward-looking as well as internally focused. In another focus group conducted by Rev. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, people active on the membership committee of a large and well-established Unitarian Universalist congregation identified several primary reasons why people stay with their congregation: to be connected to a worshipping community, to feel spiritually grounded (meaning making and internal connections), the congregation’s

strength in living out its principles and providing opportunities to do social justice work in a structured way (external connections), religious growth and learning—in other words opportunities to “bring their dreams to life” and to share both information and skills with others.²

These last items enumerated by the Membership Committee point to the final and most important reason why people become members of our congregations: the need for growth and transformation. Theologian James Luther Adams reminds us that for practitioners of liberal religion, “revelation is continuous.”³ Throughout our lives we humans are learning, growing, changing creatures. Using both reason and intuition, we spend our lives seeking to enlarge our understanding of ourselves and others and the world around us.

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 Universalists may come to a concept of salvation is to offer opportunities for growth and transformation, for becoming more whole. As one of the great ministers of the past century, Rev. A. Powell Davies, memorably put it, “Life is just a chance to grow a soul.”⁴

In considering the meanings of membership in Unitarian Universalism, it is important to look not just at the needs people bring to our congregations, but the actual experiences of membership that we offer. Here we move from the general and universal to the particular. What it means to be a member of a church differs depending upon which church it is. In educating our newcomers we commonly focus on religious ideas, and the ways in which our non-doctrinal approach to faith differs from others. But a religion is more than ideas. It is also a set of behaviors, practices, ways of being in community. And these ways of being vary greatly from one congregation to another.

The most obvious example is worship, the unique function of a congregation and usually its most central activity. Styles of worship vary tremendously from congregation to congregation—some relatively formal, others laid back; some predictable in pattern from week to week, others intentionally varied; some elaborate and ceremonial, others plain and simple. What is done and how it is done matter more than the particular ideas that may be articulated on one Sunday or another. The worship expresses, as much by its form as its content, “who we are.” Every church evolves its own tradition, even if that tradition is to be untraditional.

What is true of worship is true in subtler ways of all aspects of the congregation’s common life. Like individuals, congregations have personalities. Some are more extroverted, others less so. Some are pulpit-centered, even minister-centered; others make high demands for active committee or social participation; still others are focused on music or religious education for children or social action. The point is that every community has its own ways of being. These are not immutable, but they change slowly.

And both in thinking about our congregation, and in introducing it to others, we pay considerably less attention to explicating these characteristics—our way of “being church”—than to, say, the writings of Channing, Emerson, and Parker. But the meaning of membership in a Unitarian Universalist congregation is different from the meaning of membership in, to take a notable example, the Roman Catholic Church, and the differences are deeper than matters of doctrine or even liturgical practice. Congregations are cultures, and these cultures vary widely.

This question of how we convey the culture of our congregations to newcomers is made more complicated by the fact that we are, to a great extent, a convert faith. Our congregations consist overwhelmingly of members from other faith backgrounds. We used to always call them come-outers. Some now refer to them as come-inners. Technically, they would be called converts, a word we tend to avoid and with some justification. The word *conversion* implies a turning about or a turning around, a gradual or sudden shift in perspective. Yet most of those joining our congregations speak less of an experience of conversion than of confirmation: “This is what I always was, but I didn’t realize there were others like me, who felt the same way.”

Something like this statement is made repeatedly in any gathering of newcomers to one of our congregations. The term *come-outer* referred to the fact that all these people had come out of other congregations and faith traditions. But a closer listening to their stories reveals that most did not, in fact, come out of a Baptist or Presbyterian or Catholic church one day and into one of ours. Rather, in between was some period of time, usually years, in which they lived, as we say, unchurched. Some call this in-between period “nothing.” One might also call it secularism. Whatever its name, it is that “nothing” or “secularism” from which they actually came out, or as some now say, came in. If pressed to answer why, most refer to a feeling that “something was missing” in their lives.

This common story has been supplemented in the past decade or so by another slightly different variation, told by those who grew up truly unchurched. They were not raised in even the vaguest institutional religious environment. Their story is different in that it lacks any referent to past church experience, whether embittered or nostalgic or something in between. *Church* is for them a more or less blank slate. Their presence at our doors speaks perhaps to the indelibly religious element in our human nature, and almost certainly to the search for “spirituality,” however vaguely defined, which is omnipresent in the current era.

One or another of these stories describes in at least broad outline the experience of some 90 percent of the present membership of our congregations, more than that in many. Overwhelmingly we are what is called a convert faith. The remainder, 10 percent or so, are what are usually called born UUs—or born-inners—the second or later generations of UU families. These percentages

have apparently not varied significantly in recent generations, indicating another characteristic of our congregations: Their membership is fluid. In net terms, nearly as many, in some places more, members are exiting by the back door as are coming in by the front. Our failure to retain as adult members a greater percentage of our children has been repeatedly lamented over the years, but there is no evidence of any significant progress in increasing our retention rate.

There is reason to surmise that the increasing mobility of the population affects us more drastically than it does at least some other religious groups. Most of our congregations are small, and there are not that many of them in total. They also differ from one another in a variety of ways. They may possess a common spirit, but they exhibit very different styles. There are differences of theological emphasis and liturgical practice, some as we have said being quite traditional, others more innovative; some are more formal, others less so. We anticipate a range of religious beliefs among our membership and celebrate the theological diversity represented in our congregations, but the consequence is great variability from one congregation to another. Some have strong traditions that may be distinctively Christian, or Theist, or Humanist, for example, which are important to their self-identities. In other congregations the theology may be more eclectic or vary over time depending upon the perspective of the current minister. Since, as we have noted, we are overwhelmingly a convert faith, most of our constituents identify first not as Unitarian Universalists but as members of one particular congregation. And they identify primarily with that congregation's particular expression or style.

In consequence of all these factors, every minister has had the frustration of seeing loyal members of his/her congregation move away to locales where there is either no UU church at all or none that they find congenial based on their prior experiences and expectations. There are of course some denominational loyalists who will make do with whatever they find, but they are relatively few in number.

These factors may also serve to explain the difference that some studies have shown between the substantially larger numbers in the population who identify themselves as Unitarian, Universalist, or Unitarian Universalist and those who are actually members of our congregations. There are apparently two to three times more of the one than the other. In studying this subject we have found it useful to distinguish between and among three categories of those who may be labeled Unitarian Universalist: Identification, Affiliation, and Membership.

UUs by identification are by far the most in number. They include not only those who are presently in some active relationship to a congregation but presumably have had some relationship in the past, significant enough that they still identify themselves religiously by the name, even though they may be

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unchurched or even active in another faith tradition. Only a relative handful, apparently, are connected institutionally through the Church of the Larger Fellowship, though perhaps many more could be.

UUs by affiliation include members as well as non-members who are associated with a congregation. Both the Unitarians and the Universalists in earlier periods of our history used a statistic labeled *constituency*. The constituency of every congregation is almost by definition larger, sometimes considerably larger, than its legal membership. It includes, first of all, the children as well as other non-members in member households. For a variety of reasons some individuals who are quite active in their congregations choose not to become members; they pledge, serve on committees, are regular in their attendance at worship. Some will in the course of time become members; others continue in this affiliated status indefinitely for their own reasons. It would be interesting to know whether the number and/or proportion of such individuals varies greatly or little from congregation to congregation and what, if anything, may account for the difference.

UUs by membership are those who have fulfilled the requirements of membership for their congregations. In most of our congregations these requirements are relatively minimal. Usually, signing the membership book or a card of intent suffices. Some congregations have instituted a financial requirement, especially in recent years as the suggested contributions to the UUA Annual Program Fund and Districts have steadily increased.

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We propose these three categories of connection as tools for coping positively with the varying levels of commitment and participation that we see in our congregations. It is helpful for us to acknowledge the fact that it is the nature of our faith to have boundaries that are quite permeable. There are certainly many more Unitarian Universalists “in spirit” than there are on the rolls of our congregations, as has been documented in various population research polls. “Are you a Unitarian without knowing it?” was the provocative question of a famously successful advertising campaign conducted by the Layman’s League back in the 1950s. Later, others suggested that the important question was not that but rather, “Are you a Unitarian Universalist without showing it?” To show it, they said, meant active membership in a congregation. In hearings that the Commission has held in relation to this study, various individuals and constituencies have raised the question of whether one cannot equally “show it” by participation in non-congregational groups and organizations, including district and continental youth programs, summer camps, and any number of allied and affiliated organizations.

Who is a “member”? Interestingly, this question was addressed in the original Commission of [sic] Appraisal report, published as *Unitarians Face a New Age*, in 1936. Two notable ministers of the period were quoted in that study, both questioning the very value or purpose of counting members, and both

emphasizing our permeable boundaries as a strength. Rev. Dr. Charles E. Park, long-time minister of the First Church in Boston wrote,

With us church membership is an exceedingly tenuous matter. We are congregations, not corporations. Any fairly regular attendant at one of our churches is virtually a member. Many such have never become technical members, and never will. The result is, our lists of church members tell very little, and their increase or decrease means very little. I think this is as it should be. A real church is a quasi-public institution, to which any member of the community has right of entrance. To make much of membership is to set up a barrier, a low one, doubtless, but still a barrier. What is gained by it? Let the people go out and go in, at will. The important thing is that they find pasture.⁵

Obviously this was written long before the days of Fair Share (per member) contributions to a denominational Annual Program Fund and other practical considerations. But in many respects Dr. Park wrote from a perspective supporting an emphasis on what has been termed membership by affiliation.

The American Unitarian Association did not begin to consistently report church membership in its annual *Year Book* until 1920, and *membership* was somewhat ambiguously defined. Objecting to the practice some fifteen years later, Rev. Maxwell Savage of the First Unitarian Church in Worcester, Massachusetts, published a strongly worded article in the denominational newspaper, the *Christian Register*, declaring,

Never again let any one among us, at 25 Beacon Street or anywhere else, put forth for publication any figure purporting to be the number of Unitarians there are in this country or any other country. Nobody knows or can know. My belief is that there are far, far more than can be tabulated. But, since nobody can line them up and count them off and brand them, why, oh, why, put out these puny and misleading figures year by year? Let us stop vying with the denominations of the land. We are not that kind of church. We boast no capital C. As a whole we are not even an organization. We are a movement, an influence, and as such can be most effective.⁶

This statement returns us to the question of what “kind of church” we are. A strong case can be made in defense of Dr. Savage’s view, that our greatest impact and importance is not primarily institutional, that we are, as he says, “a movement, an influence.”

In response, the Commission of Appraisal cited its “more massive evidence that the Unitarian constituency on the whole is institutionally minded. With many voices it is calling for a leadership which shall found churches and make

them succeed in the numerical sense as well in the strength of their more dif-fused influence.”⁷ This was the approach taken by the American Unitarian Association and subsequently by the UUA. It is the direction that has been taken by mainline religion in general throughout most of the last half-century and more.

A Broader Definition of Membership

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The Commission is suggesting a broader understanding of membership, one that goes beyond our conventional practices and concerns with numbers and technical requirements. Most would agree, we hope, that individuals who fall into the categories of Affiliation and Constituency are also in a meaningful way Unitarian Universalists, while they are generally excluded from our usual definitions of membership. In part this situation has arisen out of a blurring of the distinction between two meanings of the word *church*. In our tradition of congregational polity the word *church* has two distinguishable meanings. These have been described by Conrad Wright, in his important essay, “A Doctrine of the Church for Liberals,” in this way:

In actuality our local religious communities function in two spheres, operating out of two different value systems, which may be in tension with one another. One of these is the sphere of the church, made up of a covenanted body of worshippers. The other is the sphere of the corporation established by law, with power to hold property for religious, educational, and philanthropic purposes. The two are not the same thing, even though the same persons may participate in both, and no formal distinction is made between subscribing to the covenant of the church and signing the bylaws of the legal body corporate.⁸

Historically, the difference between these two “spheres” was recognized institutionally, but this changed over time and awareness of the distinction blurred. The definition of membership in most of our congregations has focused on the secular/corporate meaning of congregation—voting rights, financial support, eligibility to serve as a trustee or represent the congregation at General Assembly—and de-emphasized the religious/communal dimension, the focus of which is the constituency of the “covenanted body of worshippers.” Should not this emphasis be somehow reversed?

And is it not in fact reversed in the actual lived life of every congregation? Does not the actual membership of most congregations change almost constantly? It is not a statistic and it is not static; it is not the number of people who may be registered in an official book or reported on a denominational form but a living community that is almost never the same

even from week to week. Does not this ever-changing constituency— influenced by birth and death, by affection and alienation, by hurt feelings and reconciliations, by generosity and cold-heartedness, by anger and enthusiasm, by all the exigencies and contingencies of life—make up the real membership of a congregation? A “spiritual body,” after all, is literally a breathing body, that is, a living thing. And it is participation in this dynamic, this life, that over time makes one in the deepest theological sense a member and at the same time transforms an agglomeration of individuals into a community.

Membership as Process

In other words, membership is a process. Though there are organizational and institutional needs to define membership cleanly and precisely, the process of membership is in reality a gradual progression from lesser to greater commitment, which neither begins nor ends at the point of formal joining. Thus, for both the individual and the institution the meaning of membership changes over time. Both are continually in process. But it is neither a smooth nor entirely predictable process. *Community* is a happy-sounding word, and it is common for religious liberals to emphasize the ideal of community as a primary reason and purpose for the institution of the church. Such idealism has its place, but building an authentic human community is never easy and only fleetingly happy. The broad appeal of the word itself is suggested by Lyle Schaller’s observation that, “the word *community* has now surpassed the word *first* when choosing the name for a new congregation. . . . In one way or another, nearly every congregation on the North American continent today boasts about the feeling of community the members enjoy. The dream of some is that placing that magical word in the name will both reinforce the sense of community and also attract those seeking a supportive community of believers.”⁹

But magic cannot create the warm fuzzy ideal that most people associate with community. Real community can only be built through hard and unglamorous work. Like any effective relationship, it requires commitment. Often these days we hear people say they are seeking a “spiritual community” but want nothing to do with “organized religion.” By the former they seem to mean a place that will meet their own religious needs; the latter they seem to associate with a place that will make demands upon them to support the institution’s needs. The reality is that you cannot have one without the other, and part of the church’s job is to lead people to the discovery of the spiritual truth that it is only by giving that we receive, giving not only our money but ourselves. In other words, only by making a commitment to a community can we hope to build a community. And this commitment consists not of lofty idealisms but of practical realities.

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G. Peter Fleck, in the title essay of his book, *The Blessings of Imperfection*, makes direct reference to the lived life of organized religion:

Well, let's be frank and admit that the church has its aggravations. The eternal and oh-so-necessary concern about finances, the annually recurring problems of balancing a budget, of finding money for repainting the vestibule, repairing the boiler and tuning the organ, the ongoing criticism of the minister's sermons, which are too liberal for some and too orthodox for others, too pedantic for some and too colloquial for others, the endless committee meetings about the Sunday School curriculum and about the propriety of social action, the persistent shortage of tenors in the choir. Who wants it? Who needs it?

The answer to this question is that we . . . want it, because we need it. The answer is that the church, and I am now speaking of the liberal church, in spite of its shortcomings, the imperfection that characterizes everything made by humans, is better, infinitely better, than no church. Maybe I should not have said "in spite of its shortcomings" but "because of its shortcomings." For isn't it true that in our churches, in these communities of the spirit, we have more resources than outside of our churches to accept each other's imperfections, to reconcile our differences, to forgive and be forgiven, to comfort and to be comforted, to love and to be loved? Isn't that what the church is all about—because it is what life is all about?¹⁰

At the very least it is what religious community is all about. Fleck writes as what he is, a highly committed layperson with a deep love of the church. How has he learned such loyalty? By an idealism grounded in realism, by a continuing commitment to what the church could be, sufficient to transcend its all-too-human realities, its pettiness, and failures to live up to its own ideals. Undoubtedly, in a long life of churchgoing, he had lived through much disillusionment. And remarkably enough, we have noted that disillusionment plays a key part in the process of membership, in the process engendering loyalty and commitment.

First Disillusionment and Religious Community

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in a book on Christian fellowship entitled *Life Together*, has addressed this subject theologically. He writes, "Only that fellowship which faces such 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." He calls the idealization of commu-

nity a “human wish dream” that “is a hindrance to genuine community and must be banished if genuine community is to survive.”¹¹

A commitment to building real religious community together is one of the significant meanings of church membership. How one reacts to one’s first disillusionment (and all the other disappointments that eventually follow) is an indicator and test of that commitment. Adversity is an aspect of every process of growth. To paraphrase Bonhoeffer only slightly, “Those who love their dreams of community more than the community itself become destroyers of the latter, even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.”

One of the continuing challenges for liberalism is its inability to inspire and engender institutional commitments, transcendent of the concerns and interest of a given time or place. Albert Einstein’s wife was once asked if she understood the theory of relativity. She replied, “No, but I know my husband, and I know he can be trusted.” Most Unitarian Universalists are not quite so trusting. Liberalism necessarily carries with it an edge of suspicion. But you have to be trusting to be disillusioned, and surprising as it may seem, such disillusionment plays a crucial role in developing loyalties and commitments.

This disillusionment takes place at the institutional level as well as the personal. This is almost inevitable in the course of one’s relationship to a congregation. 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. These are the same problems the apostle Paul dealt with almost two thousand years ago in establishing the first Christian communities. The church is a human institution and it can become all-too-human. When such difficulties arise some walk away, others step back. But fortunately there are also those who remain steadfast through these times of disillusionment, whose loyalty grows beyond it. They are not better or worse than the others, just different. Out of their disillusionment grows a loyalty less to the institution and more to the values and ideals that the institution seeks to serve and embody. It recognizes that institutional as well as personal failure is virtually inevitable. 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, what it can become through their persistence and with their assistance. They are committed in other words, not so much to the institution as to the values and ideals it exists to promote and uphold—even in its periods of failure to do so. They are patient with brash young ministers and tolerant of plodding older ones. They

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are cheerleaders in the good times and steady supporters through the bad. They keep perspective, they take a longer view.

Henry Nelson Wieman, a Unitarian and process theologian, wrote of religion and faith as being not simply ultimate concern but ultimate commitment. Inevitably in our lives we commit ourselves to something, whether worthy or not. The direction and intensity of our loyalties give shape and meaning to our lives.

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.

We have made some assumptions about what brings people to our congregations and what invites a significant membership commitment. From these assumptions we can also identify the characteristics of a congregation that will best meet those needs and elicit that commitment. First of all, a healthy congregation will provide worship services and other programs that encourage the search for meaning. Our UUA Statement of Principles and Purposes calls for our congregations to be places where this search can take place: “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote . . . acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations; a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. . . .” The local congregation can be envisioned as a laboratory where people bring their life experiences, responses, feelings, hopes, and dreams. The great experiment is to put all of that together in a form that creates meaning, gives definition to each person, and allows each person to expand his/her perspective and to continually seek and occasionally find transformation.

Rev. George K. Beach, in a 1999 Minns Lecture, uses a story from James Luther Adams that illustrates this understanding that the purpose of the church is transformation:

In the First Unitarian Church of Chicago we started a program some of us called “aggressive love” to try to desegregate that Gothic cathedral. 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 this man made one of the great statements, for my money, in the history of religion. “OK, Jim. The purpose of this church . . . well, the purpose of this church is to get hold of people like me and change them!”¹²

Beach then goes on to say, “The purpose of the church is also to expose us to perspectives that fall outside our commonly circumscribed, self-protected

existences, in order that we shall have the opportunity to read the signs of the times and to change.”¹³

Our congregations need to be places where connections can be made, networks that connect people to each other in meaningful ways. In contemporary American culture, the dislocations of traditional sources of rootedness are well known: the breakdown of the close-by extended family, the suburban sprawl replacing local neighborhoods, the mall replacing the corner store. No wonder individualism is rampant! People seek out a congregation because they need a place to belong—to be rooted, to work out questions of value and meaning, to have a spiritual life.

The congregation that understands its purpose in terms of offering people a place to grow and change and to make connections will also be a congregation that understands itself to be an organic entity that also grows and experiences transformation. George K. Beach asserts, “People do not ‘join’ a covenanted community; rather they constitute it; there is no ‘it’ without them and each time new folks join, the whole is literally reconstituted.”¹⁴ A member of a local congregation opined that he understood membership in terms of how strongly one can influence the destiny of the group. If people enter into the membership experience with the expectation that change will be the result, the structure of our congregations needs to be one that allows for flexibility and change. If in fact we understand the congregation to be reconstituted with the addition of each new member, then it can be no other way. Every person brings a different set of experiences and expectations and ways of doing things to the mix. The result will always be different, surprising, and vital.

A vital, growing, changing congregation is bound to look outward as well as inward. In addition to supporting the spiritual growth and deepening faith of individual members, it will always be asking the question about how it fits into the larger community. By words and deeds that are visible and audible, a healthy congregation shows people what Unitarian Universalism is at its best. You might say that this is the most powerful form of evangelism: demonstrating the possibilities that liberal religion offers simply by being the way we are in the world.

People seek out a congregation because they need a place to belong.

Notes

1. John A. Buehrens, “Preface” in *The Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide*, 3rd ed., edited by John A. Buehrens (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1999), x.
2. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, Case Study (Commission on Appraisal, 1998), 6.
3. James Luther Adams, *On Being Human Religiously*, 2nd ed. (1976; reprint, Boston: Skinner House Books, 1986), 12.
4. A. Powell Davies as quoted in Buehrens, op. cit., x.

5. Commission of Appraisal, *Unitarians Face a New Age* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1936), 229.
6. *Ibid.*, 230.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Conrad Wright, *Walking Together: Polity and Participation in UU Churches* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Historical Society, 1998), 13.
9. Schaller, Lyle. *The Seven-Day-a-Week Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992), 27.
10. G. Peter Fleck. *The Blessings of Imperfection: Reflections on the Mystery of Everyday Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 8.
11. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper, 1954), 27.
12. James Luther Adams as quoted in George Kimmich Beach, "The Parables of James Luther Adams," in *The Minns Lectures, 1999* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1999), 63.
13. George Kimmich Beach, "The Parables of James Luther Adams," in *The Minns Lectures, 1999* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1999), 63.
14. *Ibid.*, 55.